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NOVEMBER, 1957

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## THE SHIP FROM INFINITY

by Edmond Hamilton

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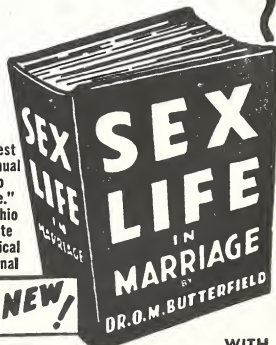
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# Imaginative Tales

ALL STORIES  
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COMPLETE

*William L. Hamling*  
Editor



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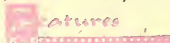
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Front cover painting by Lloyd Rognan, suggested by "The Ship From Infinity"

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# The Editorial....

**W**E'D LIKE to repeat the announcement we made in the October issue of our companion science fiction magazine, **IMAGINATION**. For many of you, this will be the first issue of **IMAGINATIVE TALES** you've purchased at the newsstand. Nope, this is not a new magazine—**IMAGINATIVE TALES** (like **IMAGINATION**) has been around for years.

**S**IMPLE fact of the matter is we've changed our system of national distribution—actually enlarging it by several hundred cities throughout the country. Our tens of thousands of old friends will continue to find us on their favorite stands each issue, and now we welcome tens of thousands of brand-new friends into our reading circle.

**T**O ALL you new readers we'd simply like to say that we feel you've discovered a real science fiction treat. In both "Madge" and "Tales" as our magazines are fondly referred to, you'll find the best form of science fiction entertainment on the market. The key word there is, **entertainment**.

**Y**OU'LL embark on exciting adventures into the vast infinity of space and time. You'll experience some of the thrills—and perils—that our spacemen of tomorrow are likely to encounter. You *won't* get an education in higher mathematics

or scientific theory, nor will we try to indoctrinate you with sociological or psychological mumbojumbo. Our purpose is to entertain you with good action stories of people in the immense vista of the future. We think we can do an exceptionally fine job of this.

**A**S a good example of what we mean take the lead novel by top-notch Edmond Hamilton in this issue. **THE SHIP FROM INFINITY** is a terrific novel of the future. When you read about "The Ship" we bet you'll experience no small bit of awe—as we did when we first read it. This is our idea of *great* science fiction, and we have a hunch you'll feel the same.

**I**N addition to entertaining fiction, **TALES** brings you many departments, features, and cartoons each issue. We're quite proud of our cartoons—the best in science fiction, and, of course, our departments and features have proven to be very popular.

**A**LL in all you'll have a science fiction ball with every issue of **IMAGINATIVE TALES** (and **IMAGINATION** too). So welcome into the fold, and let's hear from you. Along these lines, turn to page 130 and take a gander at our big free-book-bonus subscription offer. It's a real good deal! . . . We'll be seeing you next issue . . . . . with



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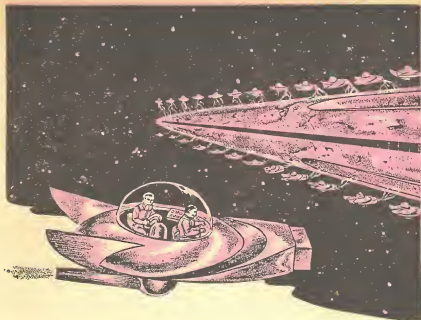
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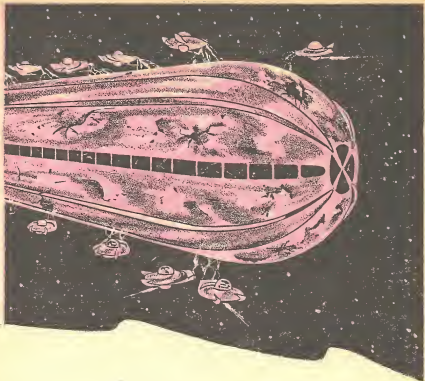
# THE SHIP FROM INFINITY

*by*

*Edmond Hamilton*

**I**T WAS BLACK where Farrel was, and cold, and there was nothing above him or below him or on either side but stars, infinitely distant. They watched him while he spun slowly on his own axis, waiting for him to fall and die. But he could not fall. There was no

place to fall to. Pluto was a black marble lost in the night. Sol was a fleck of fire no bigger than a match - flame. So he hung, and turned, and felt the whole size of the universe pressing against the frail shell of his armor, star upon star, galaxy piled on galaxy, with-



**Deep in the void it lurked, a mysterious giant of metal shaped into a vessel so vast it was beyond belief. And those who saw it—died!**

out end.

Suddenly there was a shadow across the stars.

Heyerman's voice burst from his helmet - phone. "Look at the size of it! My God. I never believed —"

And Victor's voice. Screaming,

hysterical. "Get moving! Get moving, now, or we'll never catch it—"

And It came on. Swift. Silent. Lightless. Rushing without sound, black through blackness, ancient and huge, barnacled with stellar debris, and it was true. And no hand of man had ever helped build

the vastness of this vessel, and no mind of man had ever dreamed its course outward from — where? God knew.

Hurry, screamed Victor. Hurry, hurry. Hit the propulsion unit and be for a moment a tiny comet, trailing flame across the dark. One, two, three little fiery comets converging, and now there was a place to fall to, an iron plain rushing up, up, up beneath his feet, miles long, a mile broad, blotting out the gulf, hiding the stars, and there was a sign on it, a big queer sign that seemed to say, *Stay a while, for I am Death*. Then they were inside the mighty bulk, in dark and sudden glare. Heyerman said, in a faint reproachful voice, "They must have known I was coming." And then Heyerman was in his arms, and Heyerman was dead —

Stay a while, the ripple saith. Stay a while, for I am Death. Far away the ripple sped, ripple, ripple, running red.

Ripple. Rip. Ship.

The Ship.

*The Ship.*

ROSS FARREL SPRANG up on the narrow bunk. He was sweating and shaking violently. His eyes were wide open, but it was several minutes before the black and monstrous dream dispersed and let the flat gray wall

of the detention cell come into focus. With trembling hands he found a cigarette and lighted it and sat huddled up over his knees, sucking in the smoke.

The Ship. How often he had dreamed of it. And the remembered reality was still worse than any dream.

Stay a while, for I am Death.

Silly, how that line from Kipling had got bound up with the nightmare. Maybe not, though, when you thought about it. The crocodile lurking under the waters of the ford, The Ship lurking in the fathomless gulf beyond Pluto, both of them unseen and insatiable, dragging humans down to death. For more than a century now the legend of The Ship had tempted men out beyond the limits of the Solar System and the capabilities of their craft. Few of them ever came back. The ones that did had either failed to find the dark wanderer, or else had glimpsed it only at a distance, big as a planet almost, they said, but beyond their reach and going fast. Their stories were so fantastic that only other fools believed them.

"But the stories were true," thought Farrel. "And we found The Ship. Heyerman, Victor and me, and old Croy who stayed in our own *Farhope* and hung on tight so the damned Ship wouldn't run away with us."



And it was strange. Unutterably strange. No legend had ever done justice to that huge and enigmatic derelict. They had found their way inside and wandered for a little while in the vast and soundless spaces — whatever sort of air had once been in The Ship it was long gone now — the beams of their torches cutting thin across the enigmatic dark. And it was like walking in a dead city — a city never inhabited by men.

"Where do you suppose it came from?" Victor had said, over and over. And Heyerman had answered:

"From some other star, that's for sure. Something must have happened to it, an accident, maybe a meteor — something like that, and it never got where it started for. It just drifted until our solar system picked it up and it fell into a permanent orbit."

Farrel remembered feeling a warm personal pride through the overwhelming awe and wonder. It had been his calculation of The Ship's orbit, based on a collation of all the sightings since the first one plus some ideas of his own, that had made it possible for them to get within striking distance of it.

And now they had found it they were afraid. Victor kept figuring out loud how much The Ship and what was in it would be worth

split four ways — as legal salvage it belonged to them if they could tow it in — but even a healthful greed was not enough to dispel their mounting uneasiness. It was too dark and big and still in there, and the shapes picked out by their torch - beams were too alien and queer. They wanted ground under the hull and a familiar sun overhead, and lots of light before they explored too much.

They were on their way out when they found the big cabin with the curious instruments in it, things like large dark crystalline eggs cushioned in a padded rack. And Victor said, "Hey, let's take a couple of these along for souvenirs."

Rather gingerly Farrel picked one up and put it in his suit pouch. Victor was more choosy. He discarded the first one and picked up another that looked better to him. Heyerman, meanwhile, had looked beyond the rack and said,

"Now, what the devil is that?"

"That", Farrel remembered, was a branching crystalline shape, grotesquely formed, gigantic, set in a sort of bracing network of coils so that it hung free like an elephantine spider. Heyerman went toward it. It glittered with a weird magnificence where his torchbeam touched it.

"It might be, like — well, a

sacred symbol. You know," Victor had said, obviously awed by its shining.

"Sacred or not," said Heyerman, "it looks like the great - granddaddy of all precious stones to me. I wonder if I could get a chip —"

**F**ARREL REMEMBERED that he had opened his mouth to say, "Don't". Now he had said it, but it was too late. Heyerman had already tapped the end of a thin crystal branch with the specimen hammer from his belt. There was a wild blue flare of light, absolutely blinding. Then a moment of chaos, where no effort of memory could bring anything clear. Then Heyerman limp and heavy in his arms, saying, "They must have known I was coming." Heyerman with the air steaming in little icy clouds from the rents in his armor, ripped open by the shock.

Heyerman very quickly dead, in the most familiar and most dreadful way common to spacemen, his unprotected and unpressured flesh bursting apart from its own internal force. And the crystal hanging in its coiling web, unchanged except that now it was in motion, lurching back and forth in a kind of ponderous dance, as though it was pleased at what it had done.

They had fled in blind panic down the dark immensity of The Ship, leaving the shreds of Heyer-

man behind, not from callousness but because there was nothing else to do. They had made their way outside again to that broad whale-like back with the lumped and pitted debris on it, and then from there to *Farhope*, riding behind now on a magnetic beam, a ridiculously tiny shape.

Later, when they had recovered a little from the awe and shock, they tried the next step — breaking the black monster out of its orbit so they could take it in tow. They might as well have tried towing Pluto.

"*Farhope's* a good salvage tug," Croy had said, "but it'll take her and a dozen like her to bring that brute in."

So they had been forced to leave the richest prize in the System behind. They came back, trying to figure out how to get the equipment they needed without giving away their secret and losing The Ship to some ruthless and better - outfitted rival. And on Ganymede old Croy had become too engrossed in discussing the problem of salvaging a hypothetical very big ship with another salvage man, and trouble had started almost at once.

Someone was suspicious. Someone was greedy. Someone wanted to find out exactly how much they knew about The Ship.

They had decided to split up

and get lost for a while. Croy took the *Farhope* and ran for the Asteroids. Farrel and Victor came by commercial liner to Mars. Victor had some connections there and they figured they could hide out in the backblocks. It had worked fine — for about two Martian weeks. Then men from the Special Police, an auxiliary arm of Earth authority in the Department of Planetary Affairs, whose power had been known to grow in direct ratio to its distance from the watchful eye of its superiors at Earth Central, came and arrested Ross Farrel on suspicion of homicide. When he asked who he was supposed to have killed, they said Heyerman. Later they had extended the charge to cover the missing Croy. Now Victor was missing too. He had been out when the police came. He had not come back.

And Farrel looked bleakly at the pale Martian sunlight that shone through the small window, laying a pattern of steel mesh on the opposite wall. It was morning again, the sixth morning since he had been brought here. He had had his nice comfortable four hours' sleep. In a few minutes the questioning would begin again.

He had managed to hold out so far. But he knew it was only a question of time. It made him mad. It made him so mad that he was determined to let them kill him

before he talked. Because he knew that they knew damn well he had never killed Heyerman or anyone else. Nobody had come right out and mentioned The Ship, but they didn't have to.

It was inevitable, Farrel supposed. When you have got your paws even precariously on something worth anywhere from a couple of million bucks on up, somebody is bound to want to take it away from you. It did not make the spot he was in any pleasanter.

The cell door clanked open. The guard — one of three armed guards, so as not to take any chances — nodded to him and said,

"Okay, Farrel, on your feet. Whitmer's waiting."

## CHAPTER II

AND IT WENT on and on. Only today it was worse. Today they were really opening up on him.

"What happened to Heyerman?"

"I told you."

"Tell us again."

Go carefully now and remember the lie. "We were outside the hull of our tug, making repairs. He tore his suit."

"What kind of repairs?"

Remember now. What the devil kind of repairs, what did I say before? "I—"

The big hard hand ringing off

one side of his head and then off the other. That was Leach. Acting Captain Leach of the Earth Special Police force attached to the Sub-Administrator's office for B Sector, Southeast. Leach with the thick muscles and the corded neck and the wind - reddened skin.

"Don't stall, Farrel. What repairs?"

"Detector scope."

"You said aerial before."

"What difference does it make? He —"

Whack. Whack. Stars and darkness, a taste of blood, and anger. There was a man on each side of him, holding his arms. Beyond Leach was Whitmer, sitting quietly on the corner of his desk, smoking. Whitmer was tall and neat and well built. His dark blue coverall was immaculate. His face was intelligent, interested, and perfectly impersonal. He did not seem to enjoy the beating Farrel was taking. Neither was he upset by it. Whitmer was the Sub - Administrator. He was a civilian official chiefly concerned with government. There was no reason why he should be personally interested in what ought to have been a purely police matter, a routine inquiry about a missing man.

But he was personally interested, and the inquiry was in no way routine. That was how Farrel knew they were lying. They didn't give

a damn about Heyerman. They wanted The Ship. Somebody on Ganymede must have contacted Whitmer, and now Whitmer and Leach were framing him for a mythical murder, hoping to force him to talk.

"If it was an accident," Leach was saying, "why didn't you bring his body back?"

"What body?" said Farrel. "Did you ever see what happens to a man when he tears his armor?"

"Where's your accomplice?"

"My what?"

"Victor. He helped you, didn't he? You planned it together, didn't you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know whether you planned Heyerman's murder together? Come now, Farrel."

"Heyerman wasn't murdered."

"Then why doesn't your pal Victor come in and corroborate your story?"

Farrel looked with heavy hate at Leach and they beyond him to Whitmer.

"I guess," said Farrel, "he knows what he'd get if he did."

Leach's wind - burned face reddened further. He clipped Farrel again, snapping his head back, cutting his lip.

"We'll get him. We'll get Croy, too. Then we'll have the whole story, so you might as well talk. Come on, Farrel. Talk."

Farrel told him where he could go.

Leach sighed and set his shoulders.

"Okay, we'll do it the hard way. What was your course? What was your destination? Did you pick up any salvage? Did you think you were going to? Or were you just roaming around? Come on, answer me. What was your approximate position when you went outside with Heyerman? Did you hear me, Farrel? Did you hear me? Answer!"

It went on for a long time. Part of that time things were pretty vague. Then again they would get very clear. Then he would want to kill Leach, Whitmer, too. The neat intelligent Whitmer, who sat and smoked, moving from time to time just to ease his backside.

There was once when Farrel came up out of the dark just in time to hear Leach say, "You can let go of him. He's out cold." The hands that had been holding his arms went away. It took a while for that to penetrate Farrel's brain. In the meantime he sat slumped in the chair with his eyes shut. As long as they thought he was out they'd leave him alone.

Leach was talking to Whitmer. "We're going to have to find some other way. This isn't going to work."

Whitmer spoke from a long way

off, a man coolly pondering a problem. "Well, we can try the solitary cell for a while. And if that doesn't loosen him up — we'll think of something."

Leach laughed.

FARREL opened his eyes a slit. The first thing he saw was Leach's gun. Leach was standing with his back to him, and the gun holstered low on Leach's stocky hip was almost within his reach.

He didn't stop to think about it. He lurched forward and grabbed.

And it was as easy as that.

He jammed the blunt muzzle of the high-powered discharge pistol into Leach's spine and told him to stand still, and he stood still. He told the two men who had been holding him and who were now getting a rest and a cigarette to sit still, and they sat still. Whitmer got up, but that was all he did.

"Everybody," said Farrel, breathing hard, "Everybody be careful or I'll kill him."

He jabbed the gun hard into Leach's back, and Leach said, "Yeah. Take it easy."

Farrel began to move toward the door, one step at a time, taking Leach with him.

Whitmer said, "You won't get away with it. We have all the weight on our side."

Farrel didn't answer him. When he reached the door he put his

free hand behind him and opened it and then he planted his foot in the small of Leach's back and kicked him with all the anger he had in him, and it was plenty. Leach flew forward and sprawled on the floor, and Farrel went swiftly through the door and locked it from the outside.

There was nobody in the corridor. Probably they did not want too many witnesses to what they were doing. Farrel ran. The sergeant in charge of the desk was in his cubbyhole office. He stuck his head out and yelled after Farrel had gone by, but it was too late then. Farrel was outside.

Two jeeps and an armored personnel carrier with balloon wheels were in the parking area, and a 'copter drooped like a roosting chicken off to one side. The whole jail and headquarters plant was no more than one small building set against a thousand miles of rust-red nothing, except where the Martian town of Khartach lifted a few ruined towers against the horizon at one end of a line of hills. There were only half a dozen men permanently quartered here. Whitmer and Leach had flown in from New Chicago, the Earth capital of Sector B, Southeast, over two hundred miles away.

Farrel leaped into the nearest jeep, started it, and went roaring away across the desert, trailing a

great plume of red dust.

Within not too many minutes, when he looked back, he saw that another plume of dust had been born and was following rapidly after him. The personnel carrier, he thought. It mounted a couple of guns. He estimated the range, the relative speed of the two vehicles, and the distance that still separated him from the hills. He thought he might just make it.

Then he heard the heavy distant roar of the 'copter starting up. Oh, Lord, he thought, that does it. I can't possibly beat a 'copter. He rammed the accelerator in as far as it would go. The jeep flew wildly over the uneven desert, rocking and slipping. Farrel hurt all over. He felt sick and dizzy, but he hung onto the wheel, and behind him the 'copter choked and banged and died. It started again, and died again. This was not an unusual thing on Mars for any machine with a motor. The all-pervading, always-blowing, omnipresent dust could filter through the best seals ever made.

"Let there be a lot of dust in her," Farrel prayed. "Let her fuel lines be solid with it." The hills were getting closer. The personnel carrier was not gaining. If the 'copter would just give him a few more minutes —

The motor caught. He could hear the sound, made small by the in-



creasing distance. It ran, but roughly. He glanced back, and they had not tried to take off. He sobbed and hunched his body forward over the wheel, urging the jeep along.

HE ran it half way up a dry canyon before he realized that he was where he wanted to go. The canyon twisted, removing him momentarily from the view of the men in the personnel carrier. He stopped the jeep, took the two canteens from their clips on its side, and jumped out. He saw what looked like a way up the cliff. He began frantically to climb it.

The personnel carrier could not come into the canyon because of its ballon wheels, which did not do well on sharp rock. By the time the men from it found the jeep Farrel was out of sight in the tumbled mass of wind-eroded, time-shattered rock. They hunted for him until dark, but Farrel eluded them easily, lying still in the shadowed pockets or creeping swiftly through holes and tunnels. He did not know the hills intimately, but neither did they. And he wanted more passionately to stay free than they wanted to catch him. The 'copter joined in the search just a little later than the men, buzzing sullenly up and down the ridges, but he was careful and they didn't see him. When the long shadows flowed out over the desert and thick-

ened into night, and the stars came out, Farrel peered from a crevice in the rock and saw the lights of the jeep and the personnel carrier journeying away. The sky was quiet. Then he drank up a large part of his water, and slept.

When he woke again both moons were in the sky and the desert was a great rumpled sheet of tarnished silver. It was cold and very still, so still that you could hear the thin wind rubbing and whining at the rock and making the grains of dust fall down. Farrel descended to the floor of the desert and walked as rapidly as he could toward Khartach.

Whitmer and Leach, of course, would be expecting him in Khartach. There would be men already camping on the doorstep of the Martian house where he and Victor had stayed, and where he had been arrested. But Farrel was not going there. Khartach was a big city. Very few people lived in it any more, or had lived in it for thousands of years, but most of it was still there. Probably tomorrow they would search the ruins for him, but they didn't have enough men to attempt the job at night. He thought it would be safe enough to go there.

Safe or not, he had to go. There was a chance he might find Victor there. But if he didn't, and Victor had not already taken it, there was

something in the ruins he wanted. Something he had hidden.

The dark crystal he had brought with him out of the Ship.

Victor had dropped his at the moment of Heyerman's death, so there was only the one. It was during the long haul back to Jupiter, after they had failed to move The Ship, that they found out what the crystal was for.

First Farrel discovered the delicate wires and the very slender platinum rod retracted into the crystalline "egg". Then Victor suggested that the almost microscopic terminals on the wires were intended to be attached to a power source. They modified the terminals to fit one of their tack-sized atomic batteries. The crystal became animated with a spark of light, and it pushed its thin rod out and out, uncannily like a long feeler. But otherwise, nothing happened.

*Farhope* had been all by herself then in the nowhere beyond Uranus. As she came closer to Jupiter, the last outpost of human habitation, there began to be other shipping. Suddenly, without warning, the steady spark inside the crystal began to pulse. The platinum rod adjusted itself. And they were listening to the crew of a mine-jumper on its way out to Neptune, to spend months in the bitter unhuman darkness searching for some pocket of precious minerals that would

make them all rich.

They were listening, not to their radio nor even to their spoken words, but to their *thoughts*.

The crystal was a sensitive receiver that picked up thought-waves beyond a certain distance—they could not hear each other—amplified them, and rebroadcast them in a short-range but powerful form direct to the minds of the listeners.

Old Croy had come up with the most logical explanation.

"The people of The Ship must have planned to stop at a lot of worlds. Maybe they were explorers, or conquerors, or just people looking for a new home, but whatever they were they would have to have contact with different races, different planets. And what would be the quickest and surest way to explore a strange world? Why, to be able to know what its people were *thinking*."

THAT had made sense to Farrel. There would be no language barrier. Physical differences would be cancelled out—you would *know* whether or not a given life-form was intelligent. You would know for sure whether it was friendly or hostile, docile or dangerous. With a mental eaves-dropper like that, you would eliminate ninety percent of the dangers of landing on a strange world. And

the technology that had built The Ship would not have found such an instrument very difficult to design.

They had come to call the crystal by a familiar name — the peeper. But they had not lost their awe of it, and it had made them realize even more the incalculable value of The Ship and the things it contained. When the trouble started on Ganymede, the peeper gave them warning. It enabled them to get away. But it was a hot and dangerous thing to have around. If it was found on them it would be proof positive that they had located The Ship, and then whoever was after them would never give up. And there was always the chance that it might be stolen. The Martian Guild of Thieves is an ancient brotherhood indeed. So before they had come into Khartach proper, Farrel and Victor crept by night into the vast sprawl of ruins and hid the crystal.

Now the situation was changed. Whitmer had said, "We have all the weight on our side." But the peeper might even that up — long enough, anyway, to join forces with Victor again and figure out what they ought to do. With the peeper, he could hope to keep one jump ahead of Whitmer and Leach.

Phobos went racing down the sky and only Deimos gave a stark pale glimmer to the ruins of Khartach, lying in a valley of the worn

hills. Once, you could imagine, there had been orchards and gardens, a river winding down to the plain, a spread of verdant fields. Now there was rock and dust, and the bare, naked, scattered bones of a city.

Roofless towers and shattered walls, wide courts choked with fallen stones and broken statues, rooms full of drifted sand, black holes dropping to forgotten cellars where a man would die before he could ever get out again. And the wind, nudging the old stones and saying, "Remember?"

Farrel hated the place. He watched and listened for a time from a place above the valley. Then he set his eyes on a cluster of three marble towers about a quarter of a mile in from the edge of the city, and made for them along what had been at one time a broad avenue connecting with a road that came southward through the hills. There was no more road, and the city gate was gone, and Farrel's boots sank deep in the quiet dust. Behind him, the wind smoothed away his tracks almost as soon as he had made them.

He approached the towers. There was not much left of them but three gaunt shells. Their moon shadows stretched darkly across the wide open space around them that perhaps had been a public square, or perhaps had been crowd-

ed with buildings now completely vanished. The wind riffled the dust, and the shadows wavered.

In the darkness under the walls something moved.

### CHAPTER III

FARREL'S first thought was that Victor had hidden out in the ruins. His second was that somebody had got ahead of him there to steal the crystal. Both thoughts went through his head in the time it took him to pull Leach's gun out of his belt, and meanwhile he was taking no chances. He crouched and sprang forward.

Something caught its breath and dodged under the shelter of a broken wall.

Farrel got himself behind the stump of a pillar. "All right," he said. "Come out of there. I've got a gun."

There was a pause. Then from behind the wall a girl's voice said, "Far-rel?"

He straightened up. "Tolti? Is that you?"

She came out into the moonlight, stepping light and quick, a little black-haired, cat-eyed creature with gold in her ears and around her ankles, and a poverty-stricken cloak of mangy fur. She was the oldest daughter of the house where Farrel and Victor had stay-

ed. She was not very old.

She ran to him. "Victor said you would come here if you lived." She spoke his language very badly, but no worse than he spoke hers. "When the police came hunting for you in Khartach I sneaked away and waited here. I have a message from Victor."

"Where is he?"

She made a sweeping gesture. "Gone. He never even returned to the house after you were taken. He hid by the path to the wells, and when I went for water he caught me and had me bring some of his things. And he said if you got away, or they let you go, I was to tell you he had gone to — let me be sure now I have it right."

She paused and then said carefully, "To the place where old Croy fell out the window."

For a minute Farrel's mind was a blank. Then he remembered, first a certain dingy house, and then old Croy with his unreverend gray hairs awry and his hand still clutching a bottle, tumbling backward out of a window while the women laughed. It had been a low window. He remembered the street and then the town and then the planetoid it was on. Ceres, where there was no sky but a plastic dome with the stars glittering through it even at high noon.

"Do you understand?" asked Tolti, watching him.

Farrel said he did. Then he thanked her. "I haven't anything to give you, Tolti — but you wait. One of these days I'll come back and then you shall have gold anklets too heavy to walk in."

"Oh," said Tolti, smiling. "That will not be necessary."

"But I'd like to —"

She hitched her cloak around her and stood beside him. "I am going with you."

"Oh, no," said Farrel. "Oh no you're not." He moved away from her. "You're going straight home."

She shook her head. "I like you, Far-rel. I would like you to live. Look out there." She pointed at the desert, glimmering like a sea under the moon, "Look, and look." She pointed to the passes of the gaunt hills and by inference to the deserts that were beyond. "How will you live unless I go with you? How will you escape unless I show you the way?"

"I'll manage," he said. "Victor did."

"They were not hunting so close on his heels. And I happened to know of a caravan that was only a day and a half out from Khartach. I showed him how he should catch up to it." She leaned her back up against the pillar stump and crossed her ankles. "With me you can get away. Without me —" Her hand flashed out and down like the chopping of a knife.

There was much in what she said. The peeper could tell him what Whitmer and Leach were doing, but it could not find him water or food or transportation in this out-back of a strange planet. All the trade and travel routes would be watched now at both ends. He would have to make it by devious ways if he made it at all. When he stopped to think about it, his chances did not look very promising.

But he said, "I can't, Tolti. You're just a kid. You could get hurt, or killed. It wouldn't be right. Your parents—"

She shrugged. "My parents have put my name on the marriage list. The young men of Khartach have already been around to see if I am strong and healthy enough to bear all their burdens and their children too. I would rather marry you, Far-rel."

"But—," said Farrel, horrified.

"Or if you do not wish that, then I would rather be your friend. In any case, I shall not go home. My parents will beat me, the police will beat me, and I will be given to some evil young man who will beat me until I catch him asleep and cut his throat. Then they will take me out into the desert and leave me to die. So you see? I must come with you."

"No," said Farrel. "Please, Tolti. Try to understand. You can't."

"Very well," she sighed. "I'll go alone, then."

SHE returned to the dense patch of shadow where he had first seen her move and began to pick up various things and sling them around herself, ending finally with a bundle which she hung between her shoulders. He thought she was trying him, and he watched her without speaking. But she didn't look at him again and when she was finished she marched away, not toward the hills as he had expected, but directly into one of the towers.

Then he ran after her and looked through the slim carved arch of the doorway. The moonlight fell dim and greenish through the broken walls. Parts of a marble floor still showed where the sand had not covered it, but in the center was nothing but a great black gaping hole.

Tolti was climbing into it.

He shouted at her to stop. She only looked at him from the black edge as he ran toward her, and made a jeering face.

"These are my ruins, Earthman, I know them. You find your own way."

She disappeared. He heard the thump of her landing on soft sand below.

"Wait!" he called. "Tolti, wait!"

"I have no time," she answered.

"I must be beyond the hills by morning."

Farrel didn't stop to ponder that one. He only said, "You win. But you must wait for me a minute. There's something I have to get. Will you wait?"

She said she would.

He rushed out, took his bearings from the middle tower, and paced off the right number of paces to a hump of fallen stone, no different from a thousand other humps. He got down and dug with his hands like a terrier. The peeper was still there.

He put the crystal carefully into his shirt, not stopping to connect the battery, and ran back toward the tower. He was about halfway there when he heard a man's voice calling, "Tolti! Tolti!" There was a sound of someone walking in the ruins. The sand muffled sounds, but he thought there was more than one man. He crouched low and raced for the arched doorway. The calling continued, unchanged, but coming closer.

He slid down into the dark hole in the floor. "Now you see?" he said angrily. "They've found you're missing and they figure you came to meet me somewhere. They're hunting for you."

"Never mind. Come on." She took his hand and led him away from the patch of moonglow under the hole.



Farrel balked. "That's your father calling."

"Let him. He will have the police with him. If you give me away you will be caught too."

She pulled him into a long echoing darkness cushioned underfoot with sand. In a minute she lighted a little lamp that gave a weak glow, just enough to move by. They were in a vaulted tunnel built of massive stone blocks, very ancient but sound.

"In some places the sand has almost filled it," Tolti said, "but the last time I came through I always managed to get by."

"What is it?"

"Nothing, now. It used to be a water-tunnel. There are four of them under Khartach. I think they used to come together in a huge lake in the middle of the city—but it's hard to believe there was ever that much water."

"Are there other ways in and out of the tunnel?" Farrel asked.

"Oh, yes. Many places built over it have their floors caved in like the tower."

"Does your father know about it?"

Tolti shrugged. "Who can say? My father tells me little except that I must find some other man to feed me."

"But others do know?"

"Oh, yes. I should think half the children in Khartach have been

through the tunnels at least once."

"Stop," said Farrel. "There's something I have to do."

HER eyes widened as he pulled the crystal out of his shirt and started to connect the tiny battery. "What is that?" she asked, and he told her he would explain later.

"Quiet, now," he said, and put his hand on her.

The crystal pulsed and flickered. Tolti gasped once, sharply, and then was still.

There were three other men beside Tolti's father up there in the ruins. They were all Earthmen, and all from the police. They were tired, bored and apprehensive. They disliked the ruins. One of them thought of ghosts. One saw himself falling into a bottomless pit. One remembered a similar walk he had taken through the Valley of the Kings by moonlight and thought vaguely philosophical thoughts about life and death and time and empires.

Tolti's father thought chiefly about what he was going to do to Tolti when he caught her, to pay her back for making him all this trouble. Almost as large in his mind bulked the thought of how much reward he could expect to get out of the Earth-bastards if he helped to catch Farrel, and what he would do with that. Behind both was the latently explosive fury of the no-

tion that his salable female property might have run off with Farrel for free.

Tolti did not seem surprised. She only whispered, "You see?"

Farrel nodded. He focused more sharply on the man's mind, and found in it a vague picture of the aqueduct, but more like something told to him than something actually seen. He did not seem to know about the tower and the particular hole in its floor. There were other things in his mind, though. Tolti's father was not a nice man. Farrel shut off the peeper and said, "Let's go." He no longer had any compunctions about taking Tolti with him.

She grinned and led him swiftly away along the tunnel.

It was a curious sort of journey. Several times they crawled over mounds of sand and twice Farrel thought they were not going to get through. The dim light of Tolti's lamp, the featureless length of the tunnel and the darkness contributed a timeless quality so that Farrel was not sure whether the trip was taking them hours or days. Several times he stopped to listen with the peeper, but the three policemen did not care very passionately whether they caught Farrel or not, and they cared even less about catching a Martian's runaway daughter. They dragged their feet more and more and passed eventually out of range.

The slope of the tunnel became steeper. There were no more openings and the floor was almost free of sand. They climbed and climbed and suddenly there was light. Tolti put out the lamp. They crept blinking and exhausted into a great jagged pit in the hills that had once been a reservoir. It was day and the sun was high in the cold sky.

Farrel listened with the peeper and heard nothing. He and Tolti sat in the mouth of the tunnel and ate and drank sparingly. She had brought with her all the food and water she could carry — probably one reason her absence had been noticed.

"There is a tunnel on the other side," she said, pointing across the dry pit, "that served a city beyond the range. I've never been through that. But we have a story that Khartach and this other city went to war over the water when there was no longer enough for both, and that Khartach won."

"You'd never know it now, would you?" said Farrel.

They crossed the floor of the pit and found the mouth of the other tunnel about the middle of the afternoon. Tolti believed that it was open to the place where the army of Khartach had broken it between the other city and the hills. They entered its dry darkness, and just after they did so, while Tolti was lighting her lamp again, Farrel

heard the helicopter come booming and bumbling over the valley outside.

They were still hunting for him. If it had not been for the tunnels he might have found it impossible to keep out of their sight. He smiled and went off hand in hand with Tolti. Here at least they could not follow him.

NEARLY three weeks later Farrel and Tolti were in the overcrowded steerage of a not-too-legal tramp that carried everything from mining machinery and pigs to people. Those three weeks were among the roughest Farrel had ever gone through, and he would not have lasted through the first of them without Tolti to show him where to dig for the meager drops of water that kept them alive after the bottles were emptied, or to guide him to a caravan track far from Khartach.

They had travelled with a caravan for days, and once the 'copter had appeared in the sky and swung low over the line of march while Farrel sweated under his borrowed Martian cloak and made sure his gun was free. But the 'copter went on. Then they had a piece of luck, hitching a ride on a mining company's big double-rotored workhorse that had been delivering parts close to the caravan track.

In ten hours they were in a port

city, and Farrel was looking for a way to the Belt. It had been a touchy thing, having to keep out of sight and operate without the proper papers, but the peeper had kept him informed of policeman and it had been an immeasurable help in finding a booking-agent who did not greatly care where his money came from as long as he got it.

They had raised enough by selling everything they had but their clothes, the peeper, and Leach's gun, to pad out the money Farrel had on him when he was arrested and which Leach and Whitmer had not bothered to take away.

They wallowed for weeks among the whirling ports of the Belt, eating bad food and breathing bad air. Tolti was sick, and she must have wished herself back in Khartach many times, but she never once complained. Farrel got very fond of her, and the fonder he got the more he worried about what was going to happen to her.

He worried about what was going to happen to him, too. If Victor had not reached Ceres after all, or had gone on, he was going to be in a mess. He didn't have money enough left to feed them, let alone pay passage anywhere. If Victor failed him, he was sunk.

The tramp docked at last on the flat tableland of bare black rock beside Ceres' clustered domes. Sealed trucks took them from the ship's

lock through the airlock of the dome, dumped them, and went on.

Farrel stood for a minute with Tolti beside him, looking around. She was starting up at the plastic dome with black sky on top of it, and the stars, and the Sun that was no bigger than a Christmas-tree ball and not much warmer. Farrel was used to that. He was looking at people, at the blackrock streets and the dirty plastic houses. Gradually he drew Tolti away from the rest of the group and behind a huge stack of crates close to the dome edge.

He turned on the peeper.

The flood of jangling thoughts it loosed on him was dizzying. He stayed with it, though, winnowing back and forth through the tumult of hunger and ambition, hope and despair, grief and love, fear and defeat. One steady note stood out and he tried to focus on it. It was his name. Victor was thinking his name over and over, and there was a message with it.

*The gray building opposite the lock. The top window. Join me. I have news from Croy.*

Farrel looked out around the crates. He saw the building, a dingy spaceman's hotel, and he saw the top window, but at this distance he could not see Victor. Victor, though, would be able to see him perfectly well with glasses. Farrel felt a vast relief. He reached out for Tolti's

hand. And then Victor's thought came through with sudden sharpness.

*Look out, there are two men going toward you — I think they're cops!*

## CHAPTER IV

FARREL caught Tolti and pulled her farther back behind the crates. He had been so intent on clarifying Victor's thought that he had overlooked the less strongly concentrated thoughts of the two men who had come so abruptly into the picture. Now he sought them out.

They were detectives from Ceres Central. They were looking for him. They knew that he might be traveling with a Martian girl, and they had seen him when he moved behind the crates. They were fairly sure he was Ross Farrel. They were on their way to find out.

From their minds he received a composite picture of the square stack of crates, perhaps thirty-five feet long and twenty thick and almost as high as the height of the curving dome at its outer edge. One man was approaching the stack from the right, the other from the left.

Farrel picked up Tolti's wiry little person and boosted it toward the top of the stack. He said, "Climb!" She climbed like a monkey and he followed. "Keep

down," he said. The men were now on either side of the stack, toward the back where they expected to find him. Farrel crept the other way, over the flat top. He could hear Victor, practically shouting at him with his mind. Hurry, run, go to the left where those big babies are, you've got a clear field there. Jump, damn it, you've only got a minute —

He jumped, with the girl right beside him. He ran where Victor had told him, in among the towering components of a disassembled power - plant, all in their flat protective paint and skeleton crating. The areas near the three main locks were used for freight storage, and there was a strip perhaps a quarter of a mile long ahead of him that was one crowded jungle of stuff waiting to be used somewhere in the domes or sent on to one of the mining camps.

He might possibly have made it unseen if it had not been for Tolti. Farrel was a spaceman, and for as long as he could remember he had been adjusting himself automatically to heavy gravity, light gravity, and no gravity at all. He didn't even think about it. But Tolti had never been off her home planet. Mars - normal is light compared to Earth-normal. Compared to Ceres-normal it is very heavy. Tolti jumped but she had

no chance to run. She flew like a ragged bird through the air, her cloak flapping behind her, and fetched up with a crash against the side of a generator housing. Farrel swore, but he stopped to pick her up. And one of the detectives came around the corner of the stack of crates and shouted, "Hey!"

Holding Tolti in his arms, Farrel fled among the islands of freight. Now he was glad of the fractional gravity and used it for all it was worth. Tolti was frighteningly limp. He kept asking her if she was hurt, but she didn't answer him. She was bleeding from the nose. He became terribly alarmed, but he did not dare stop. Victor projected a desperate thought — *Stay with it, I'm coming!* After that Farrel kept his mind on what the detectives were thinking, between worrying about Tolti.

They were thinking that they could easily catch him. Ceres gravity was just as light for them as it was for him, and they were not burdened. They spread out and raced after him, sure they could trap him no matter how he turned and dodged. The one thing they did not count on was the peeper. Farrel knew what they were going to do before they were really sure themselves. Three times they missed him because of this, and then Victor had come into the freight area too. Farrel doubled back to join him.

VERY quickly he lost Victor's thought as he entered the peeper's insensitive range. But he picked him up visually. They met behind the temporary shelter of a gigantic blower unit designed for the atmosphere plant of a dome somewhere in the swarming Belt. There was no time for greetings. Farrel put Tolti down. Light gravity or not, he was breathing hard. He loosed the clasp of her ratty cloak, ran back and threw it in front of the blower where the detectives would be sure to see it. Then he spoke very briefly to Victor, listening to the peeper. Victor nodded and darted away to other shelter. Farrel looked at Tolti and then very reluctantly left her where she was and went dodging away on a circuitous route, doubling back toward the detectives.

He lost them, too, in the peeper's blind spot, and crouched quietly behind a row of pumps until he could see them. They came looking baffled and rather angry, and now they had their guns in their hands. Then one of them saw the cloak on the ground. He pointed and they put their heads close together and whispered. They separated and began to advance on the blower unit, using what shelter there was in case Farrel should be armed. The Want that Ceres Central had received on Farrel had not said anything about armed and dangerous. It had only

said that he was to be apprehended and held for local authorities on Mars, and "For questioning" was the only charge against him. But they were not taking undue risks.

"All right," one of them said to the blower unit. "Come out of there. We have you pegged."

They moved a little closer, their guns ready.

Victor appeared on the opposite side of the lane along which the men were advancing, behind them and opposite Farrel. He looked unhappy. He was an easy-going type, inclined to be lazy, and he hated trouble and upset. He had in his hand a ten-inch strip of steel he had picked out of the freight. Farrel nodded to him. Then Farrel took Leach's gun out from under his shirt, caught a deep breath, and jumped.

The two detectives never had a chance to fire their guns. One of them got the first part of a yell out of his mouth before he went down, but it was not loud enough to attract any attention. Farrel's clubbed gun and Victor's steel strip took care of them both with great swiftness. They tied and gagged them, in feverish haste, with their own belts and handkerchiefs, and dragged them between crates where they would not be too readily seen if anybody did happen to come by. Then Farrel ran back behind the blower unit.



Tolti was sitting up, swearing viciously in Martian and holding both hands to her face, which was starting to swell over the nose and one eye.

Farrel kneeled beside her. "That's a relief," he said. "I thought you were hurt."

She glared at him. "I've dashed my brains out, that's all — a thing of no matter."

He kissed her and helped her up. Victor was shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, looking around. "We've got to get out of here," he said. "Can she walk?"

Tolti yanked away from Farrel's grasp. "My legs are not broken, only my head." She lifted the skirt of her tunic and wiped carefully at the blood on her face. Farrel took hold of her again.

"Take it easy until you get the feel of the gravity," he said. "Come on."

They hurried off, not talking much, wanting only to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the two men who would presently come to and start making trouble for them again. They left the storage area and plunged into the narrow blackrock streets, crowded with people and crammed with pre-fab plastic buildings that housed everything in a sort of insane democracy. Churches and bars were cheek-by-jowl, sometimes on different floors of the same build-

ing. Bordellos, hospital, civic offices, a thriving mortuary, mining company offices, assay offices, machinery and supply companies, lawyer's offices, countless cubby-holes full of people, all jammed together in the inflexible circles of the main dome and the three smaller ones it had been forced to sprout in the slightly more than a century since the first ships had landed on this, the largest of the minor worlds.

FARREL had always enjoyed coming here before. It was relaxation and relief after the endless dark months prospecting and hunting for salvage along the far-flung reefs of the Belt or the outer moons. By comparison with the iron walls of *Farhope* or some other rusty tug, the Ceres domes were wide and bright. Now they felt tiny and evil, like a trap.

"They are a trap," he said aloud to Victor. "They know we're here now. How long can we hide out in this fishbowl?"

- "Not very long." Victor licked his lips nervously. He was tall and dark-haired and gangling, dressed like Farrel in a nondescript cover-all. "I don't know, Ross. I thought everything was figured out, but now it don't look so good."

"You said you had news from Croy?"

"Did I? Oh. Before, you mean. Yes. He's going to pick us up. Or

he was going to."

"What do you mean, he was going to?"

"Well, as soon as I got here I contacted Croy — kind of round-about, you know. We figured to wait a while for you, and anyway he said he was busy. Then we heard definitely that you'd got away from Mars. So I watched for every ship that came in, hoping you'd be on it. Couple of days ago, Croy sent me a message. He'd give you till the end of this week and then he couldn't wait any longer. So he'll land *Farhope* out on the Dead Camp Flat and pick up whoever's there. I figured to hire us a couple of suits and walk it."

"End of the week?" said Farrel. "I've lost track."

"By Solar Arbitrary," Victor said gloomily, "that's four and a half days. Twenty-four hours is about the limit in a suit. And it isn't going to take the cops anything like three and a half days to run us down."

Farrel walked in silence, thinking. Tolti hung close to him now, afraid of getting separated and lost. The surging streams of people carried them along, squeezing between the narrow walls, caught in eddies around the more populous bars and the mine and employment centers.

"How much money have you got?" asked Farrel suddenly.

"About a hundred credits. Why?"

"We might just be able to do it," Farrel said, and quickened his pace. "Come on, start humping. I want to make it to Number Six Lock before our friends back there get loose and send out a general alarm."

"What're you figuring to do?" asked Victor.

"Get out of the domes. If we hire a truck outfit, we can at least keep moving."

"The kind of a truck outfit we can afford," Victor muttered, "won't keep us moving long."

But he hurried beside Farrel. Before they left the main dome for one of the smaller ones, Farrel tried the peeper again. He was able to disentangle the thoughts of the two detectives from the irrelevant chaos that flooded in. They were awake again. Their heads hurt. And they had ideas about what they were going to do as soon as they got free.

Farrel moved even faster toward Number Six Lock.

## CHAPTER V

THE AIRLOCKS of the minor domes were exit-ports to the countryside — fields of black rock, humps and jags and hollows of black rock, valleys and mountains of black rock, with a black sky overhead and no air to cloud or

soften it. When the sun shone there was a good bit of light but very little warmth. At night it was like riding a floe of black ice in an ocean of stars, with the horizon dropping off short on all sides so that you felt if you walked too far in any direction you would fall over into the naked constellations. Only miners, supply-truck drivers, and fools went out.

The man who rented them the truck counted their money three times to be sure it was all there. "Prospecting, eh?" he said.

Victor said, "Yes."

"Whereabouts?"

"Oh," said Victor, "We got an idea or two." He looked anxiously toward Farrel, who had withdrawn to a little distance and was listening to the peeper. Tolti was sitting cross-legged on the ground, looking remote and very Martian.

"Uh huh," said the man shrewdly. "The old South Polar mine idea, I'll bet. Must be a dozen guys like you every year come through here, looking to pick up that vein again, I wish 'em all luck."

"Thanks," said Victor. "Maybe we'll be the lucky ones." Farrel came hurrying back. "Are we all ready?" he said.

"All set," the man said. "Supplies for a week, four suits, everything in working order, guaranteed. Never lost a party yet." He laughed. As an afterthought he added, "There's

an emergency repair kit in the tool locker."

He waved the slender wad of credit notes at them. "This pays for two days use only, Arbitrary Time. It's in the contract. Now if you ain't back by the end of that time I won't send the cops out after you right away. But you'll be held responsible for every extra day, and don't bother trying to sneak back in through one of the other locks. We got a system."

"Oh," said Victor, "we sure wouldn't do anything like that."

Farrel beckoned to Tolti. She joined him and the three of them got into the truck. Little beads of sweat were standing out on Farrel's face. "Somebody just found them," he muttered to Victor. He dogged the hatch into place and climbed into the operator's blister. Victor began checking the air system. Farrel started the motor and rolled, clanking heavily out of the truck-rental yard and down the short street to the lock.

Tolti said, "We will live in this for five days?"

"We *hope* to live in it," Farrel said grimly. "It must have been one of the first they ever brought to Ceres. Find that repair kit, Vic, and keep an eye for leaks."

They passed into the air lock and the great door sealed shut behind them. Pumps bled off the trapped air. As the pressure drop-

ped, Victor went around poking and listening, and Farrel peered out of the blister, from which he could see all the beetle-like truck except its belly and extreme rear, looking for tell-tale wisps of freezing vapor. He did not see any. He resisted an overwhelming impulse to slam on the power and butt his way through the outer door. Every second he expected the vents to be closed and air to be pumped back again, signifying that the lock would not be opened for them. But after what seemed like years the outer door opened up and he sent the truck grinding through it on its flexible tracks. The great tilted plane of a rock face twenty miles across spread out before him in the thin glare of the setting sun. He turned the truck across it, heading south.

After a while Tolti came up and stood beside him, looking out. The little bright ball of the sun was obscured by the rising - up of a jagged crest and it was night as suddenly as though someone had thrown a switch. Tolti gasped and flung up her hand against the stars that seemed to spring by the millions out of the sky.

"See anybody coming after us?" he asked her, and she looked back at the domes shining in the midst of the black plain.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

"If we can just make it off this goddam pan before they see us,"

he said between his teeth, "we might have a chance."

HE POURED on more power, torn between the need for haste and concern for the senile frailty of the truck. He put Victor to teaching Tolti how to get into a spacesuit in a hurry. The heating system did not work very well and the interior rapidly became cold. The air had an unpleasant chemical smell, as though it had already been used far too many times.

The smooth pan broke up in a series of jumbled ledges. Luminous markers appeared, pointing out a place where a natural pass had been blasted and smoothed into a reasonable road. Farrel turned the truck into it. The domes were now hidden from sight and a last look across the pan had not shown any headlights coming after them. Farrel gave Victor the peeper to see what he could pick up with it, and kept the truck trundling on as fast as it would go, its own headlight beam cutting a hard-edged swathe through the airless dark. They were now heading east.

"Get anything?" he asked Victor.

"Everybody's thinking at once," Victor said. He fiddled with the crystal, his eyes shut in concentration. "I can't get anything clear — no, wait a minute. Somebody

— yes, the guy that rented us the truck. There's an alarm out for us and he's heard it. He's thinking — he's calling — no, he's *talking* to the guys we hit. Yeah. Now I get them, too." He paused. "I think we just made it. And I think we better keep going. Fast."

The truck jolted and lurched and groaned, creaking at every seam. Farrel said grimly, "I don't dare wreck her too soon. Which way do they think we've gone?"

"The man is telling them south. But they don't believe it. They figure we let him think that to throw them off."

"Okay," said Farrel. "We'll go south. Check that map for me, will you?"

Victor rolled out the plastic strip map, stained and greasy from much use.

"About a mile ahead there's a turn-off and a pass to the southern flats. After that you're on your own. If we keep going right around — *here* — we'll be about within reach of Dead Camp Flat at the right time."

Farrel glanced at the map and grunted. "If we keep going," he said. "Yeah."

The hard white beam of the headlights struck on the cold faces of the tumbled rocks where the road bent. On either side the dark walls closed them in, making their miniature peaks against the stars.

At long last there was another luminous marker and Farrel swung south again, toward the South Polar area where a rich find of uranium had lasted all too short a time. As the man who rented them the truck had said, people still hoped to find an extension of that deposit even though the ground had been so thoroughly worked over that a teaspoonful of uranium could not have been missed.

The map showed several small outfits of various sorts dotted around in the South Polar area but the big mine had been abandoned for years. With any luck, if the truck kept running, they could stay out of sight of the small camps, dodging around the rock pans, creeping without lights if they had to. Every mining camp had a radio, and the minute they were seen and reported they were through.

The road climbed between jagged walls. The pass opened, narrow and forbidding, and then they were heading down the farther slope with the glimmering expanse of the southern rock-pans spread out before them.

As Victor had said, from here on they were on their own. There were no roads on Ceres except where a pass or a fill had been necessary. Taking turns at driving, the two men pushed the truck farther and farther into the barren antarctic regions — a South

Pole both worse and better than the Earthly one that had cost so many lives and so much agony. Worse because life of any kind was a precarious intrusion on this sterile rock adrift in the void between Mars and Jupiter, existing from minute to minute only by the complicated interdependence of mechanical aids. Better because the rock was sterile and airless, with neither wind nor snow nor ice to trouble it. Such as it was it was, unchanged and unchanging.

The peeper showed no pursuit close behind them. The police-manned trucks were searching east and north for them, depending on the obvious assumption that they would not say they were going south and then actually go there. But all camps on Ceres had been alerted by radio and asked to report any passer-by. So the truck wound and trundled furtively, giving the collapsible plastic domes a wide berth. They passed the abandoned workings of the uranium mine and then began to angle northwest toward Dead Camp Flat. Tolti cooked for them, wretched meals of powdered and dehydrated foods rather badly prepared. Tolti had not had much experience with such things, and the ancient cooker didn't work right anyway.

THEY SLEPT in shifts on the narrow bunks and developed a

gnawing claustrophobia that must have been agonizing for the girl, bred to the wide deserts and open skies of Mars. Farrel and Victor were used to the confines of a ship, but this was different. A ship was larger and they had definite duties connected with it. It was their living. And they knew it was sound. Here in this cramped shell they lived every second on edge for the sudden hiss of escaping air, for the final stuttering out of the uncertain machinery that gave them breath and warmth.

They found what seemed to be a safe hiding place, in an isolated bay between two protruding tongues of rock, and stopped there to wait until it was time to make the last rush to Dead Camp Flat and meet the *Farhope*. They used the peeper at intervals, listening to the minds of the various groups that hunted them. Ceres was not limitless in extent. Inevitably the search was turning back upon the southern area. They waited, judging time and distance, and after a while they were forced to realize that they were not going to be able to wait long enough. They took off again, trying to keep ahead of and equidistant from the two converging lines of search that were closing in on them from the north and east. Victor drove, and Farrel pored over the map.

"We can't outrun them both," he



said, "and even if we could we'd only lead them to where they could catch Croy too when he lands. How long is it now till he's due?"

Victor figured. "About fourteen hours."

"Keep going," Farrel said. And he showed Victor a place on the map. Victor's eyes widened.

"But that's putting us right in a trap," he said. "We can't get through or over."

"Way I see it," said Farrel, "it's our only chance."

The truck went on, groaning and sagging on its frayed tracks, over the naked rock.

Six hours later they reached the place that Farrel had chosen on the map. It was daylight, a raw glare of sun patched and scored with shadows as sharp - edged as though drawn with ink. The level rock broke off abruptly, ending in a crevice that appeared bottomless because no light reached into it. It was deep enough, even in this light gravity, to smash anything heavy that fell into it. Beyond the crevice was a wild and twisted ridge. Beyond the ridge was Dead Camp Flat.

Farrel stopped the truck.

They got into the space - suits — the three best - looking ones, with the least worn equipment. They gave each other a last check-over, and then Victor and Tolti got out of the truck. Farrel went

up into the operator's blister and started the motor again. He put it in gear and then went down and out in a hurry through the open lock. He joined Victor and the girl and they started away, moving in the long agile leaps of men accustomed to asteroid - walking. Each of them held one of Tolti's hands, towing her between them like a captive balloon. Behind them the truck moved with ponderous stupidity toward the brink.

They had barely reached the northern end of the gap when the truck went over. They stopped to watch it. There was no sound at all. Its forward tracks went spinning out into nothingness and the rear tracks pushed it on until the body overbalanced and fell with a certain slow majesty, catching a last glitter of light on its windows and then vanishing into the utter black below. They could not tell when it hit the bottom. They would, Farrel thought, have to pay for the old heap some day.

THE CREVICE here was narrow enough to jump, in this fractional gravity. They jumped it and began to climb the ridge, going carefully because of rotten rock and jagged outcrops that can tear a suit before a man realizes it. The girl hampered them. But she was small and willing, and though her little face peered out through the

helmet glass very white and big-eyed, she never whimpered. The quick night overtook them before they reached the top. When they did they stopped to rest, looking back over the plain they had left behind. Lights showed on it, diamond-bright, moving toward them.

Farrel put his helmet against Victor's—they had not turned on the helmet-radios for fear the pursuing trucks would pick them up—and shouted,

"They'll find our heap in the crevice—let's hope it'll take them a long time to find we aren't in it!"

Long enough, he hoped, to let the three of them get out on the Flat, see where *Farhope* landed, and get aboard.

They made the treacherous descent, again slowly and carefully, and began the trek out across the flat that had taken its name from an early-day tragedy of the mining fields. Now they made all the speed they could, but it was far slower than the truck and they had to rest from time to time. Farrel had the peeper at his belt. He knew when the search parties met and found the crashed truck. He knew when they let a man down on a rope to check it, and when they decided that the three people they were looking for must have gone over the ridge on foot. He "watched" four men—the two detectives and two other policemen—climb into

suits and come after them. When they reached the top of the ridge and looked out over the flat, Farrel and Victor and Tolti were lying prone in the shadow of a little hump in the rock, offering no moving target to the eye.

They lay there and waited because it was the only thing they could do for the moment. The four police scrambled down the slope of the ridge and spread out, moving slowly forward. And then faint and far off but swiftly gathering, the peeper field picked up the mind of old Croy. Farrel twisted his head inside his helmet and looked at the sky. *Farhope's* rockets made a lovely trail of fire down the blackness, like a shooting star.

The prone figures gathered themselves. The four walking ones paused, stiffened, and began to run.

*Farhope* dropped down, settling her dumpy shape almost gracefully onto the rock.

The three prone figures rose and moved in giant bounds toward her, the two tall ones taking the small one between them.

The four also bounded mightily, and two of them produced guns.

The three reached *Farhope's* open lock and tumbled in. Silent and flaring, shots came after them, splashing against the dark iron of the hull and the rapidly closing outer door. Almost before the crack was sealed, *Farhope's* tubes

burst into full power and the tug lifted, poised herself mockingly on a glorious pillar of flame, and then took flight, kicking the barren rock of Ceres away beneath her, her blunt nose pointed toward the stars.

## CHAPTER VI

OLD CROY was a master-hand at the difficult art of flying the Belt. Most salvage skippers are, because there are more wrecks in the Belt than anywhere, and more chances to pick up a few credits on the side prospecting. He took *Farhope* away from Ceres and sent her whirling and dancing through the labyrinth of hurtling worldlets at a speed and with a diabolical recklessness that shook off any pursuit from Ceres before it got close enough to detect.

Neither Farrel nor Victor offered to help him. They crawled out of the airlock and out of their suits, and they helped Tolti out of hers. Then they crawled into the bunks in the crowded cabin just aft of the cockpit and lay there. For the time being, they had had it.

After a while Croy told them that there was a bottle in the galley locker. Farrel mustered up enough strength to go and get it, overcome with a warm surge of love for *Farhope's* grubby, familiar person. He found the bottle and shared it

with Victor and Tolti. Presently they stopped gasping and began to breathe again.

Croy said, "From the looks of things, we might just as well have stayed together."

Victor muttered something about eggs in a basket, and Farrel said, "No, they might have caught us all. As it was, the only one they got was me. Vic and I just picked the wrong place to go. Too far back in. We were noticed. Somebody on Ganymede must have tipped off Whitmer to look for us in his sector." Farrel shook his head. "They sure worked me over."

"Didn't tell 'em anything, did you?"

"You know damn well I didn't!"

"Don't get riled," said Croy mildly. "A man can say a lot when he's half conscious, and no blame to him."

"Well," said Farrel, "fortunately it never went that far. They got careless for a minute, and I got away."

He explained how it had happened. "Hadn't been for Tolti, though, I'd never have made it."

"You were lucky," Victor said, shaking his head. "That Leach has got a big reputation for being tough. He might of killed you."

"They didn't want me dead. They wanted me alive and talking." Farrel turned to Croy. "How did

you do?"

Croy answered without turning his head. They could talk back and forth quite easily between cabin and cockpit, the tug's dimensions being considerably less than a liner's. Croy's thick shoulders were hunched over the control bank, his powerful hands moving with the speed and delicacy of a girl's over the firing keys.

"I did real good," he said. "I hunted up some of the boys and formed what you might call an association. We couldn't bring The Ship in alone, we know that. And if we went to one of these big salvage outfits like Benson's or Pett's on Ganymede, they'd take over, graciously give us ten cents apiece, and send us on our way. So I figured if I've got to share with somebody I'd rather it would be with friends. I lined up Schultz, Wallace, Gilson, Carlucci and Friedman. All good guys, and their tugs are in good shape."

"Yeah," said Victor, considering technical problems. "Six of us ought to be able to do it." He sighed. "I hate to think of having to split up that big beautiful jackpot at all, but like you say—Oh, well, I guess there'll be plenty to go around."

"Boy, you can keep yourself in booze and women for three lifetimes on even the smallest amount you could get." Croy grinned at them

over his shoulder. "All we have to do is get the six of us there, break The Ship out of its orbit and get it under a legal tow, and then nobody can take it away from us."

"What's the plan?" Farrel asked.

"They're going out separately, from different places all through the Belt. That way, nobody'll notice them. We'll rendezvous well beyond Pluto and then go on together."

"What about supplies?" said Farrel.

"That was a problem. I don't dare bring *Farhope* into port anywhere, so we worked it out like this. The tugs will outfit in different ports, and each one will take on something extra. Then on their way out—we calculated the orbits real careful so it'd work out right—they'll drop off the extra stuff in a cache on Umbriel. We'll pick it up. Simple as that."

"Sounds good," Farrel said.

"It is good," Croy said, indignantly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," said Farrel. "Just beat." He lay back in the bunk and patted *Farhope's* side. "Nice to be home again."

He called to Tolti, but she was already asleep. Farrel said to Croy, "Call me when it's my watch," and went to sleep himself. And a vague uneasiness troubled him even in his dreams.

IT CONTINUED to trouble him in the weeks that followed, while they left the asteroids behind and then the orbit of Jupiter, heading out into the dark void where few ships ever went and from which even fewer ever came back. He could not shake off a feeling that somehow, somewhere, something was wrong.

He could not say in what way, or why he felt it. Croy was sure of his plan, and Croy was smart and shrewd, a long time in the game. He had seen to it that he was not followed in his secret prowlings around the Belt. And he was positive that he could trust every one of the men he had contacted.

Farrel didn't doubt this. None of them could possibly gain as much from selling the secret to someone else as they could get by actually salvaging The Ship. Anyway, Farrel knew all the men himself and knew they were okay.

Nobody had followed them out from Ceres, either. They had got away too fast, and Croy's expert piloting had lost *Farhope* almost immediately in the swirling mazes of the Belt.

Yet the uneasiness itched and tugged at Farrel. It made him constantly get out the peeper to see if he could pick up anything. Croy and Victor both complained that he was giving them the jumps, and finally he took to doing it in secret,

when he was piloting and the others slept.

They left Saturn, its rings and swarm of moons behind and far to starboard, a spot of cold glittering splendor against the distant stars. *Farhope* plunged sturdily on toward Uranus, running short now on everything, food, fuel, oxygen, water.

Uranus, huge and dimly gleaming, rolled toward them on its orbital path, a dead planet sheathed in ice, forever beyond the reach of warmth and life. They picked up the tiny circling chunk of rock that was Umbriel and began the approach.

Farrel switched on the peeper.

For the first time he heard something.

There were ships in the void behind them, far behind, but following.

He shouted to Croy and Victor and they came to listen. The confused babble of many minds was unclear at first, but then Croy's face became flint-hard and his eyes blazed.

"A salvage fleet," he said. "One of the big outfits. Benson's, I think. We've been sold out—"

"Wait," said Farrel urgently. "Listen." He was trying to focus down on the leading ship. Somebody was talking. The communications man. The clearly directed thought behind the words sprang out from the random background.

*Signal coming through faint but steady. They're heading for one of the moons.*

*I wonder why?* asked another mind, and Farrel stiffened. He looked at Victor. "That's Whitmer," he said. "And Leach is there too. Hear? They were talking with Benson, then. But—"

A third mind, probably the captain's, said, *All we can do is follow the signal. Not too fast, either. We don't want them taking fright and—*

Croy suddenly struck the peeper out of Farrel's hands and smashed it on the iron floor.

"Signal," he said. "Fine. So that's why you've been playing with that thing every five minutes. You had it rigged some way to broadcast a tracer." His hand shot out and gripped Farrel by the throat. "You escaped from them, did you? How much did they pay you to escape, Farrel? How much, you Judas?"

Farrel got white. He rose from the edge of the bunk where he was sitting. He knocked Croy's hand away and hit in the stomach, a good hard angry blow. Croy staggered back and leaned against the opposite bulkhead, bent over.

"You damned old fool," said Farrel. "If I'd sold out to them I wouldn't have had to escape. I'm your navigator, remember? I plotted The Ship's orbit the first time and I'm the one that'll plot it again. I don't need either you or Victor.

I could have taken them right on out and you'd never have known it until we brought The Ship in."

HE KICKED the shards of crystal with his toe. "We could have found out how they were following us, but you had to go and smash it. Now how will we ever know?"

"Well," said Victor, his face heavy with suspicion and the fear of losing The Ship, "if you didn't sell out somebody else sure as hell must have." He looked at Tolti. "She's been with you all the way. Kind of funny, wasn't it, she would all of a sudden want to leave home that bad?"

Tolti hunched together like a threatened cat. "You lie," she said. "If it wasn't for me he would never have got away from Mars."

"Maybe," said Victor. "All the same, I want to see what you got in your pockets."

She backed away from him. "You let me alone."

"Yes," said Farrel. "Let her alone." He caught Victor by the shoulder and swung him around. "How about you, when I think of it? How do I know what you've been doing all this time when you were supposed to be waiting for me to join you?"

"That's a fine way to talk," said Victor, "after I saved your neck back there."

He wrenched away from Farrel's grasp. "What's the matter, don't you trust your little Martian friend? Are you scared to have her searched?"

He grabbed again for Tolti. But her thorny Martian pride had been outraged by Victor's accusation. She dodged agilely under his arm, reached Farrel's bunk, and grabbed the gun that Farrel had taken from Leach and which was now hung up on the bulkhead. Before anybody could stop her she had spun around and snapped a shot point-blank at Victor, her face a perfect mask of fury.

And nothing happened.

"Hold it," said Farrel sharply. "Everybody hold it."

They held it, Victor pale and shaken by the realization of what had almost happened to him, Tolti staring at the gun. Farrel took it away from her. Croy, who had got his breath back, straightened up against the bulkhead but remained leaning against it, watching them all.

Farrel moved to where there was nothing in front of him but the bare after-bulkhead. He fired the gun.

Again nothing happened.

He fired it two or three times with the same result. Then he took the gun into the tiny machine shop and began in silent and furious haste to tear it apart.

The others stood bunched in the

doorway and watched him.

"There," said Farrel. "There you are. Look at that." He pointed to the scattered parts of the gun. "Judas is right. Judas goat, with a little bell around my neck. I should have known. I should have realized that my whole goddamned escape was a phony, just rigged up so I'd lead them to The Ship. There isn't even a power pack in the gun! It's just a dummy with a transmitter in it."

He picked up a hammer and pounded the compact little transmitter into a useless lump of crystal and wire.

"No wonder that 'copter kept brushing us so close on Mars. They knew where we were every minute."

He swore. "If I hadn't been so groggy," he said, "I'd have realized it was too easy. Leach practically asking me to take his gun—oh, hell!"

Victor said, "Those guys on Ceres sure weren't in on it."

"Nobody would be in on it but Whitmer and Leach. Naturally. And they'd have to put out a general alarm or it would look too funny. They had to take some risks. I suppose they figured if I did get caught they could always arrange another escape. Anyway, they didn't have much to lose. They weren't getting anywhere the other way."

Victor looked at Croy. "You be-

lieve him?"

Croy said, "Sure I believe him."

"Why?"

"Because there's one thing he said there ain't any doubt about."

"What's that?"

"He don't need either you or me to find The Ship again. Like he said. If he'd sold out, we wouldn't have known about it till it was all over."

"Yeah," said Victor. "I suppose that's so. Well, what do we do now?"

"I don't see how there's any choice about that," Croy said. He gestured toward the bench where the wrecked transmitter lay. "They haven't a signal to follow now. They know we're heading for one of the moons, but they don't know where we'll go afterward. They're a good way behind. If we crack on all the power we've got, we might just out-run 'em."

It was on the tip of Farrel's tongue to say, "We might, if Benson's tugs weren't so much newer and faster than ours."

He restrained himself. Croy was right, they did not have any choice of action. They might as well have hope.

## CHAPTER VII

URANUS, fourth largest of the System's worlds, hung above their heads so low and massive that

it seemed as though the upside-down peaks of its icy ranges would strike them if they straightened up. All of them including Tolti were frantically busy, transferring supplies from the cache left by the outgoing tugs into the nearly-empty bins, holds and tanks of *Farhope*.

In Umbriel's practically non-existent gravity the task was not hard. It just seemed to go on forever. Farrel caught himself peering anxiously into space every few minutes, thinking to see the flares of Benson's salvage fleet across the stars. It was pretty obvious now what the deal had been. Benson on Ganymede had got wind of the rumored find of The Ship—he was the one who had tried to trap them there. When they got away Benson had been able to trace Victor and himself to Mars and had alerted Whitmer, who as subsector administrator would be able to hunt the two men out and arrest them with a pretense of legality. Benson probably had known Whitmer already. Or it might have been simply that Whitmer was the right man in the right position. Anyway, they had joined forces. And if Benson could bring in The Ship and Whitmer could share in the proceeds, Whitmer would be able to buy and sell Mars itself, let alone B Sector, Southeast.

They did not see the rockets of the salvage fleet. It must still be



well behind. But now that they no longer had a signal to follow they would close up as fast as possible in order to track *Farhope* with conventional radar. And Benson's tugs were among the best in space.

There was, as Croy had said, only one thing to do, and they did it. They wrestled in the supplies as fast as possible and then took off again, heading at top speed into the black immensity beyond. They proceeded straight to the rendezvous because there was not fuel enough to spare for any elaborate dodgings or false leads to throw Benson and Whitmer off. They passed the orbit of Neptune, raced on, left Pluto's path behind them, and entered the shallows of the great interstellar ocean that runs for light-years between the stars. Out here there was nothing, no life, no world, no sun.

Nothing but five little tugs hovering on their auxiliaries, all huddled together for comfort in the face of that empty vastness.

Now for the first time *Farhope* broke radio silence to speak briefly to the others, warning them of the need for haste. And one by one the main drives flared to life and the six ships moved off together on the last leg of this journey that had turned into a deadly race. They did not use either radio or radar to learn how close behind them Benson's fleet might be. There was

no use in setting up sign-posts for them to follow. Anyway, there was nothing they could do about it. All they could do was run and hope.

Farrel lived, ate and slept with the old clacking computer, working out the complicated coordinates of juxtaposition with the previously calculated orbit of The Ship.

They reached a point. An imaginary point, marked with an imaginary pencil on millions of miles of nothing.

They waited.

AND IT CAME. Ponderous, silent, and oh God, how incredibly huge and dark. A ship as big as a world and helpless as any dead thing, rushing headlong out of the void in pursuit of its endless and meaningless journey around an alien sun. The starlight burned on its iron flanks, on the humped discolored patches of stellar debris caught by its field of gravity and welded to it by long association.

The Ship. Legend, reality, wealth, danger, death.

They sprang at it, the six little tugs, motes beside a mammoth. But they were strong motes. And they were clever. They had planned their strategy long ago, before they ever left the Belt. Magnetic beams licked out invisible lines of force, concentrating on the exact area of the mighty hull where the most lever-

age could be applied, using The Ship's own mass and velocity to help shift it on its axis. They did not try to do it all at once. They let The Ship carry them with it, applying their lateral blasts judiciously so that the six tugs began to act as a sort of drogue, gently pulling, gently nudging, wheedling the enormous plunging mass of The Ship into doing what they could not possibly make it do by force. The twenty-two men who manned the tugs worked around the clock. Sleep had ceased to be a regular and accepted thing. When a man fell into his bunk they let him lie there until he got up again, but nobody planned on it. You could always sleep. You could not always, or ever again, be engaged in the greatest and richest salvage operation ever attempted in the history of space flight.

If they had had time they would have succeeded.

They did not have time.

A fleet of nine tugs accompanied by Benson's own fast cruiser came swooping out of the trans-Plutonian darkness and there was no longer any hope that they might possibly have been lost or overlooked. Probably, Farrel thought, the fast cruiser had ranged ahead of the tugs, quartering space until it had located *Farhope* and got a radar fix. Then all they had to do was wait until they caught up.

They had caught up now. They had found Croy's little fleet, and they had found The Ship. Radio silence was not important any more. They broke it.

Croy, as senior captain, sent a call to Benson's ship—the standard warning from one salvage vessel to another to stand off from a job already claimed.

The message was not answered. It was not even acknowledged. Benson's fleet continued to sweep toward them.

"What the hell are they doing?" said Croy, and then shouted to Victor in the communic room. "Keep trying. Somebody in that bunch has got to answer."

Nobody did.

Croy's other captains—Wallace, Carlucci, Friedman, Gilson, Schultz—tried too. They sent out repeated demands for recognition and acknowledgement.

They didn't get it. Benson's fleet came closer and closer, glinting in the starlight.

The tugs of Croy's fleet talked tensely back and forth.

What are they up to? Why don't they answer? They're coming in fast—Christ, are they going to ram us?

How could they do that without killing themselves? They just want to scare us into cutting loose. If we do that The Ship is free to them.

Don't cut loose, I'll slaughter the

first man who drops his beam!

Yeah, but what are they going to do?

It became obvious what they were going to do. It was a thing not unknown in the annals of salvage, men being what they are. A tug is not armed in the conventional sense. It does not carry guns. But it possesses all the tools of its trade. It has contained-charges for clearing wreckage, and lateral-blast charges for getting a dead hulk moving. It has magnetic beams to grapple with and thrust-beams to push away with. And it has a demolition beam for sectioning a ship's hull the way a chicken is sliced with a carving knife. Who needs guns?

**B**ENSON'S CRUISER shot ahead and above into a position where it could act as observer and coordinator. The nine tugs separated, six of them coming in separately, each on a target, and the other three hanging back waiting for things to develop so they could see the best place to add their weight.

Things developed fast. In all six of Croy's tugs there was a frantic scramble into space-suits and then the men hurried like soldiers to battle-stations. In *Farhope* Croy handled the ship's controls and Victor the thrust beam. Farrel had the demolition beam. The rocket-launchers for the contained charges

were between them.

Victor had the magnetic beam too, the invisible line of force that held them to The Ship. "Don't cut loose," said Croy, "unless I tell you, no matter what. But if I tell you, don't sit sucking your thumb, but cut fast!"

Benson's tugs closed on them, looking large and sleek and unpleasantly strong. They were all the newest thing off the ways, heavy-duty craft with the most improved type of tools. Old Croy cursed them. He cursed Benson and Whitmer and Leach and all thieves alike. Farrel knew that part of his rage was the fear that he was going to lose *Farhope*. He did not love *Farhope* like a woman, nor yet like a child. But a man cannot live in and with and by a ship for many years without feeling a certain familiar attachment to it. Anyway, it was his.

Victor was practically crying inside his helmet, a small boy hanging desperately to a balloon when he knows that the bigger boys will inevitably take it from him. A balloon over two miles long and worth more money than all of them could count. Farrel did not blame him.

He glanced out the port and then turned his head to look at Tolti. She was strapped into a deck harness beside the rocket-launchers, supported by webbing so that the wild pitching of the ship should not

throw her into a bulkhead. Her too-large suit hung limp and dejected around her and her head was lost inside the bulging helmet. He had tried to make her strap in to her bunk to be as safe as possible, but she had refused. So now she was manning the launchers that he had showed her how to handle, and she smiled at him, and there was something in her eyes that got to him with a sudden pang right at the last moment he would have chosen to think about how he felt toward Tolti.

He looked out the port again at the oncoming tugs, braced himself, and waited with a hot and deadly anger for them to come within range.

They didn't quite do that. They didn't have to. Their thrusts and demos and charge launchers were newer and more efficient over long distances. And Croy's tugs were handicapped. They had *The Ship* and they couldn't let go, and as long as they couldn't let go they couldn't maneuver.

*Farhope* was hit suddenly by a thrust-beam that laid her on her beam and sent her lurching dangerously toward the great wall of *The Ship's* hull. During the time that she was exposed and helpless, a rocket-borne charge exploded against her belly. There was a second terrific jar, a rending sound, and then the distant shriek of leak-

ing air from the lower regions. Red lights flared on the control panel. Automatic doors slammed shut, sealing off the breached hold. And Croy said quietly,

"Cut loose."

Victor reached out and slammed the switch.

The magnetic beam, the umbilical that bound them to *The Ship* and held them helpless, was gone. *Farhope* leaped forward, away from the black towering wall, toward a silver tug with a red emblem on it. Farrel had a brief, half-stunned vision of other tugs cutting loose from *The Ship*, rising, scattering. One had smashed into the giant hull and was falling away with part of its bow broken. He wondered who it was and then he didn't have any more time to think because Croy was barrelling straight in on the silver tug with every appearance of wanting to ram him. The silver tug dropped hastily out of the way and Croy laughed. "That's the boy," he said. "That's the dirty little so-and-so. Give it to him, Ross."

FARREL HIT the demo-beam controls and *Farhope* became in an instant a mighty cutting-torch, projecting a knife of blue flame from the nozzle just below the curve of her bow. Croy took her low over the Benson tug and held her there as long as he could,

perhaps three quarters of a minute, practically riding the other ship's back as it twisted and turned wildly to escape. Then he went on and left it to limp away with a big black hole burned through its upper hull and a great plume of air spouting out of it like the breath of a blowing whale.

*Farhope* whirled and went lumbering back to her own destruction. Friedman's tug was already hulled and caught between two of the Benson ships, which were driving it relentlessly toward collision with The Ship. There were four or five good minutes during which Tolti launched six rockets and saw one hit. Victor knocked one Benson tug loose from Friedman with his own thrust-beam. Farrel was poised and ready with his demo. And then one of three reserve tugs came up from behind and dropped a lateral-thrust charge fairly on top of them, and *Farhope* split open like a burst can, and that was that.

Croy's voice came over the helmet radio. "All here?"

They were. The blast itself had not reached them, shielded by *Farhope's* thick hull, and their seat belts had kept them from being carried out on the rush of air. They were dazed and deafened, but still alive. Farrel released his belt and went over to Tolti and helped her out of the harness. Croy said,

"We're going to crash The Ship.

Let's get the hell out."

They got out, tumbling through the smashed hull. Tolti panicked for the first time since Farrel had known her; at the sight of the black void falling away with no up or down to the outer edges of infinity. She clung to *Farhope* screaming, and Farrel had to drag her away by main force. Then she fainted and that made it easier. The great hull was very close to them. They cut in their propulsion units full force and clawed away from the point of impact where *Farhope* would end her final voyage. There were other little comets in the night around them, men in spacesuits straining toward their last refuge. Only two tugs of Croy's fleet were still operative and six of the Benson tugs were making short work of them. Three of the Benson tugs were wrecked, two of them probably beyond repair.

Croy said, "Where's the hatch you got in through before?"

The broad black metal plain spread out vast and rough as it had in Farrel's dream. He heard Victor catch his breath in a kind of sob and say, "I don't know, how could anybody find one little bitty hole in all this? And they'll be after us in a minute."

Perhaps it was because Farrel was in a state of partial shock from the swift violence of *Farhope's* ending, but more and more this

approach to The Ship became like the dream, with the same unnatural clarity of detail. It was as though a recorded tape in his memory vault had suddenly started to unreel. "It's this way," he said, and led off on an angle to his left, without stopping to consider whether he really knew or not. *Farhope* had originally, and for the same reason, hitched on to The Ship at approximately the same place as the six tugs. Farrel and Victor had made the first boarding on their own, but when they had left it after Heyerman's death they had come back almost to where they were now. Farrel led them in reverse, too dazed and shaken to quarrel with his subconscious when it picked out some particular guiding roughness of surface and said *This way*.

Other suited figures joined them, straggling out in a long line. Fourteen, fifteen men. If Farrel was wrong there would be fifteen dead in a very few minutes.

Benson, in his cruiser high up above the flight, must have looked away from the last destruction of Croy's fleet and seen what the men were doing. Perhaps he had not realized that anybody had actually entered The Ship and might just do so again. The cruiser dived toward them and a couple of the silver tugs came after.

Farrel found the hatch. It was

large and it was open just as it had been when they found it before, and for millennia before that. It swallowed the fifteen men easily before the spraying flame of the cruiser's jet could touch them. They dodged into the shelter of that mighty hull and somebody said, "Fine, but they'll be down in after us."

"Oh, no," said Farrel. "There's a control." He hunted for it and found it. There must have been automatic power controls, of course, but the builders of The Ship had provided a manual as a stand-by. He tugged at the great wheel and two or three others joined him. In space there had not been any rust or corrosion. The perfectly machined, simply-designed parts had not corroded or jammed. The huge hatch cover slid into place, blotting out the starlight.

They sat in the dark that was slashed by one sharp torch-beam. For a long time nobody spoke.

Then Carlucci said, "They can cut in through the hull anywhere they want to."

"I don't think they will," Farrel said. "They don't know what they might be destroying inside. I'm not even sure they could if they wanted to. This hull is the toughest metal I ever saw. Not just an alloy, either—the builders must have altered the molecular structure of the stuff. Our ordinary torches

didn't even scratch it."

"So okay," said Croy wearily. "They can't or won't get in at us, at least right away. So what? Our air won't last long. Not nearly long enough for us to starve or die of thirst. In about twenty-four hours it won't matter to us when, how, or if Benson gets inside The Ship."

Silence fell again, except for two small sobs from Tolti, who had come out of her faint too soon.

## CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS HARD to think, hard to prod the weary and hopeless organism into life again. It was easier just to sit and wait until the last long sleep came over you.

But you didn't. There was a law against it. An old law, unwritten, unspoken, handed down intact from the first beginnings of life. You got up and went on as long as there was half a breath left in you.

Farrel said, "We might look and see what these people of The Ship used for air. We might even get the atmosphere plant going again."

Faint hope. Several of the men said so.

"Okay," said Farrel. "So I'm crazy. But I'm going to look anyway. We didn't see any signs of extensive damage when we were here before. Maybe there wasn't any. Maybe there was another rea-

son why The Ship's voyage ended up like this. Come on, Tolti." He helped her up. "Victor? Croy?"

They groaned and muttered but they got up. One by one the others did too. They would live longer if they sat perfectly still and conserved their oxygen supply, but when they thought about it there did not seem to be much point in it.

They straggled off across the vast emptiness of the hold they were in, to wide doors standing open on a corridor that stretched fore and aft as far as their torch beams carried.

Farrel pointed forward. "Vic and I went that way before. There are transverse corridors, and a whole bunch of stairways going to other levels. I think they were escalators when The Ship had power. We didn't get too far."

"If we split up," Croy said, "we'd stand a better chance of finding something." He did not quite say "in time".

"Be damned careful what you touch," said Farrel, and told them what had happened to Heyerman.

Without much hope, but beginning in spite of themselves to feel the awe and astonishment of actually being aboard this giant nameless wanderer from some alien star, they separated and began to move off by two and threes.

Farrel went aft this time. He had a shrinking aversion to seeing

the room of the great crystal again, with the frozen shreds of Heyerman's body still in it. Besides, he wanted to look at the vital organs of The Ship, and they were more likely to be aft and below, linked together by the main power plant. The four of them from *Farhope* travelled together for a time and then Croy and Victor chose a different corridor and Farrel went on with Tolti.

It was eerie going. The darkness, the still dead desolation, were bad enough. But it was so damned big. The corridors went on forever, with hundreds of doors opening into hundreds of unnamed spaces designed for unnamed purposes by builders of an unnameable race. You gave up trying to look into every one. Some of them were crammed with different types of equipment, or were nearly empty of different kinds of supplies, or were entirely empty. A lot of them had obviously been living quarters, and it was equally obvious from the chairs and other furniture that the people of The Ship had been humanoids, perhaps even humans. The rooms were all neat and clean, but with no personal touches, no clothes or books or pictures. It was as though block after block of occupants had moved out, leaving nothing of themselves behind.

"I wonder what they were like," Tolti said, "and where they came

from, and where they went."

"God knows," said Farrel and shivered, oppressed by the rows of empty rooms.

They went on deeper into the bowels of The Ship.

THERE WERE very large spaces like ballrooms or gymnasiums or theaters. A couple of them he was pretty sure of. There were mess halls and a gigantic galley. Everything was quite old and well worn, but whoever the people of The Ship had been they were sticklers for keeping things spotless and in good repair. The electronic ranges in the galley looked as though they would still work if there was only power for them. Farrel began to have a totally unreasonable stirring of hope.

Tolti was looking at stacks of plastic dishes in their dispenser-racks. "You know?" she said. "It is as if they expected to come back and use all this again."

Farrel shook his head. "I don't think so. Nothing changes in space—look around. There isn't a single bit of anything to indicate continuity. They scrubbed up after the last meal and put everything away and left it."

"But for who?" said Tolti. "If it wasn't for themselves, I mean. Maybe they left it all—for us?"

"For us?"

"For whoever found The Ship,



sometime. Maybe—" Her voice came quick and eager over the helmet radio, like a child dreaming up a story. "Maybe they were proud of themselves and their Ship. Maybe they didn't want all this to go to wreck and ruin even if they had to die themselves, so that someday people would know—"

Friedman's voice broke in on them, sharp with excitement. "I think we've found the main power plant. And this you've got to see to believe."

A few minutes later Farrel and Tolti were standing with Friedman and four or five others at the very heart of The Ship—a central core incredibly huge, with marching lines of giant dynamos carrying power aft to the colossal chambers of the main drive and forward to all other parts of The Ship.

Friedman pointed excitedly to the pile that squatted like an emperor among his slaves above the dynamos. "You know what that is?"

He raced on before Farrel could give him an answer, which was No. "It's a cold-fusion furnace. We've been working on it for over a century and never got it out of the laboratory yet, but *they* mastered it, and it gave them just what our researchers always said it would give—practically unlimited power and faster-than-light speeds."

Farrel remembered that as far back as the middle of the last cen-

tury the possibility of controlling nuclear fusion at temperatures close to absolute zero had already been under study. He stared hungrily at the mighty face of the pile, with all its dials and gauges inert and all its signal lights dead. Power. Power unlimited. Power enough, if there was still any fuel at all, to—

No. That was crazy.

But it looked so well-preserved, the whole complex of furnace-pile and dynamos, as though it had been shut down carefully and laid up like any ship in mothballs—only in the sterile cold of space there was no need of protective coverings against rust. He flashed his torch-beam back and forth over the looming pile and something caught his eye, a painted symbol that glowed when his light touched it. He held the beam on it. It was painted large on a blank area of the wall, and it had a horrid familiarity. He turned suddenly cold and flicked the light away, and Friedman said,

"What was that? It didn't look like part of the board markings—"

"It isn't," Farrel said grimly. "It's an outline sketch of the big crystal that killed Heyerman." He moved away uneasily. "Let's see if we can locate the atmosphere plant."

CROY AND VICTOR had got there before them. They joined forces there, a handful of tiny mobile figures dwarfed by the giant

pumps flanking an enormous cylindrical chamber that must have been half a mile long. Here too was the same look of care, of preserving for future use.

"It's the same way up there," said Croy, pointing forward. "There's a bunch of what seem to be synthesizers for food and water, just like this one is for air. They look as though all you'd have to do is push a button."

"Yeah," said Victor, "but I ain't pushing any. You know what, Ross? Every one of those synthesizers has got a picture on it, of the crystal—"

"That killed Heyerman," Farrel said. "I know. The main pile has one." He poked around with his torch beam. "See there? Up over that selector panel. There's one there too."

"It's a warning," said Victor. "That's what it is. Hands off. If we try to fool with these things they'll kill us just like that crystal did Heyerman."

"Now wait," said Farrel sharply. "Wait just a minute. That's what I thought, but when you put it in words like that — Listen, suppose we hadn't just happened to find that particular cabin the first time, and Heyerman hadn't tried to chip a hunk off the crystal, how would we know?"

"I don't get you," said Victor.

"Well, the people of The Ship

went around painting that symbol on all these things. It must have been some message for the people they hoped and expected to see it — that's us. If they meant it as a warning — what good is a warning if people don't know they're being warned? They could have thought up a symbol for danger that wouldn't be so highly specialized that nobody but themselves could understand it."

"Hey," said Croy, "maybe you got something there. Maybe they were trying to tell us something else. But what?"

"I don't know. But the crystal is the only thing in The Ship that's still powered. That was a static discharge that killed Heyerman — the potential must have been building up in the crystal for thousands of years, from the tiny bits of energy it could pick up from cosmic radiation. It must have been designed for the purpose, so it would have power even when The Ship itself was shut down and dead."

"Power," said Croy, "for what?"

"I don't know," said Farrel, "but I'm damned sure it wasn't for killing stray spacemen who might happen on it. If they wanted to booby-trap The Ship they'd have done better than that. Instead, they left the door open."

He started away, spurred by his own swift excitement. "I'm going

to have another look at that crystal."

Tolti ran after him immediately, and then Croy said he would come to. So did Friedman. The rest of them, including Carlucci who had now joined them, decided they would stay and see if they could puzzle out the operation of the power plant, which was the first requisite to getting anything started. Victor said he would stay with them.

"I was in that room once, and once was enough."

"Okay," said Farrel, "but for God's sake take it easy with that reactor. You could blow the whole Ship to pieces on a teaspoonful of fuel."

"He's right," said Croy. "No need to get reckless just because you figure you're dead anyway. Who knows, maybe Farrel's right and the old people left some kind of a message that would help us."

Somebody, probably Victor, muttered that it was a fat chance. Farrel paid no attention. He was suddenly in a fury of haste to get back to the cabin where the crystal was.

He wasn't exactly sure why. But it was more than a hunch. It was a conviction, a certainty that the people of The Ship had painted that symbol everywhere for a purpose.

He could not find the cabin at

once in the labyrinthine gloom of corridors and great rooms full of curved glass screens and massed computer banks and the rigid memories of life long vanished — paint worn to the bright metal underneath by the passage of many feet or the daily friction of someone's hand or elbow at a table, the million scars and stains of use. The Ship had come a long way before it died.

FINALLY HE CAME across a place that was familiar to him and turned a corner, and the room was there, large and shadowy, with the rack of peepers and beyond it the huge crystal like a grotesque and glittering spider in its web of coils, with the shrunken and twisted thing still on the deck beneath it.

"Okay," said Croy. "You found it. Now what do we look for?"

"I don't know." Farrel walked slowly toward the crystal, keeping his torch - beam on it and his eyes averted from Heyerman's wreckage.

There was the crystal. Probably artificially constructed to a specific design. There were the springy coils, and that was all.

There was no protective device to keep people away. Ergo, the thing was not intended to be lethal or those who had worked with it originally would not have been exposed to too much danger. Ergo, it

had built up more potential than it was supposed to, enough to kill a fool who whacked it with a metal hammer

Probably even so if there had been air, and Heyerman had not depended on a suit for existence, he would only have been shocked or singed a little. The charge itself hadn't killed him. It was the bursting of the suit sleeve that did it.

But the crystal must have waited a lot longer time than its makers had planned for it, loading itself with a slow accretion of energy it had no way to discharge.

For what? For what?

He turned and looked at the peepers, the dark crystal eggs racked in their cushioned pockets. Mind readers, mental eavesdroppers. The people of The Ship had mastered that borderline country of science, too.

Little crystal, big crystal. There must be a connection, a solution—

But the peepers would not receive at short range. That wasn't it.

He moved the light around, a spot of hard brilliance with no refraction, no scatter in this vacuum.

He saw, beyond Heyerman, a slender metal column about four feet high, with a bar of crystal mounted on it. The bar was set parallel to the face of the big crystal. One end of it was longer than the other. The short end was

flared and bore a crest of slender filaments.

When he looked closer he saw that the long end was shaped to fit a receptacle in the big crystal, exactly where that end would strike it if the bar were turned on its column until its axis was vertical to the opposed face.

The others had come up behind him. They must have seen the significance of the bar about as soon as he did, but nobody said anything. He would have to make up his own mind, and since he was there first he could have first turn. If he decided not to risk touching the thing he could step down and let the next man decide.

If he did risk it there might not be any further decision.

Sweat ran cold and unpleasant down his face and the air in his suit seemed stifling.

It was that that decided him. He only had a few more hours anyway, so he might as well go now as then, if the same thing happened to him that had happened to Heyerman. If it didn't, and the people of The Ship hadn't played some kind of a cruel joke on them, it might mean life for all of them.

"Stand back," he said, and pushed Tolti firmly out of the way. Then, feeling sick with fright, he reached out and grabbed the bar and swung it into place before he had time to think about it.

## CHAPTER IX

THERE WAS A SHOCK, but it was in his mind. He put up his gauntleted hands quite futilely to the sides of his helmet and reeled back to the farthest end of the cabin, the way he would have from a stunning burst of sound.

The super - charged crystal was pouring out a tremendous volume of thought.

*We do not know who you are, but we have prepared this record against your coming, so that our name and the knowledge of what we have accomplished may live even though we ourselves must die.*

Croy, who had made his own hasty way to the far end of the room, swore in startled surprise. Friedman, beside him, whispered, "Shut up and listen!"

The crystal, shot through now with latent glimmerings that pulsed outward through the rod and lit the filaments with a brightening glow, sent its message roaring into their minds. Tolti, cowering against the wall, reached out and took Farrel's hand.

*The languages of men are clumsy and difficult to learn. Perhaps in time you will learn ours, for there is much of value in our library. But we have chosen to speak directly to your minds, for only that way can you really understand the*

*meaning of what we have done—*

Thought formulated into the equivalent of speech gave way almost without transition to pictorial images. Not the external and impersonal images of video, but the vivid, proud, poignant memories of a living mind. They entered into Farrel and took him over, so that he forgot who he was and why he had come here and what he had to do. He forgot Tolti, and Croy, and Whitmer and Leach and Benson. He became another man, from another world far, far away in space and time.

A beautiful world. It had seas and mountains, wide plains and deserts, little villages and great cities. It had good weather and bad, good people and bad, good laws and bad. It circled a blue - white star on the edge of a cluster on the other side of the galaxy. At night the sky was glorious with stars. The world was called Fehar.

Science was far advanced on Fehar. Its ships had been in space for several hundred years, roaming from star to star, charting great sectors of the galaxy. Now the crowning achievement in the field of interstellar flight was about to be attempted.

The Ship was finished.

It had been built in space, where its great size was not unwieldy. It had taken thirty years to build. The great ribs of the primal skele-

ton had been laid and bolted before Nen - sur was born. Nen - sur was a man now, a junior officer, standing in the ranks of The Ship's company, one thousand and three young men gathered together in the assembly hall.

Beyond the ports a great crowd of public and private craft hung watching in space, and in the assembly hall dignitaries of Fehar were making speeches. Nen - sur did not hear them. He was thinking of home, of his parents and brothers and sisters, and he wanted to cry for them at the same time his heart was swelling and his pulse pounding with pride and dreams of glory.

When the speeches were over and the dignitaries had left, the signal bells rang and the lights flashed and Nen - sur went with the others who were off duty to the ports to watch.

Far beneath his feet the mighty drives of The Ship stirred and roused to life. The decks quivered. Slowly, ponderously, with immense pride, The Ship began to move. And the watching craft all flashed a final salute, and as Nen - sur looked at them they became like tiny flecks and then were gone, and Fehar dwindled behind them. Presently it too was gone.

The Ship had begun its voyage.

And Nen - sur thought, *To travel clear around the galaxy, to circum-*

*navigate the Milky Way — and I will chart the unknown stars!*

THE SHIP GATHERED its strength and speed and dropped Fehar's sun and then the whole cluster far astern. It passed into hyper - drive, from which it only emerged into normal space to examine a solar system with habitable planets or map more closely the shores of a nebula.

And Nen - sur charted the stars. In the vast chart - room of The Ship, he and the others of his particular craft sat surrounded by the huge image - conversion screens and all the other intricate apparatus for star - mapping and created year by year a three - dimensional strip - map of the galaxy and stored it in the banks of the cartograph center, to be brought forth again at will and projected in the stereo tank. Nen - sur changed from a young man to a middle - aged man, and he thought often of his family and friends at home, and mourned them all as dead. Because of the time factor involved in The Ship's tremendous velocity, he would outlive his contemporaries by several of their centuries. The goodbyes they had said had been more than mere words.

But always there were more stars to chart.

As the ship's company aged and the vast circle of the galactic rim

began to slope homeward again, they talked more and more of Fehar and their return. Already they knew that many of them would not make it. The time factor had been calculated accurately, but not accurately enough where an infinitesimal error could mean a man's life.

They buried increasing numbers of their company in space, among the alien stars. But still there would be many left to see home again.

They believed this. But it was not so.

A factor they had not known before, because no other voyage of this speed and duration had ever been attempted, became manifest. The retardation of time was cancelled eventually by a limitation of living cells which could not be made to continue living indefinitely.

The death rate accelerated with frightening speed. The ship's company drew together in ever smaller compass, leaving whole blocks of living quarters vacant. The Ship grew larger and more lonely, more silent, peopled more by memories than by living men. It took on a quality of doom. The mathematicians worked endlessly with their computers, balancing what they knew against what they hoped.

And Nen - sur charted the stars. Fewer than half of the young

men who had been with him in the chart - room were left. They were no longer young. Neither was he. And there were still a billion stars between him and the sight of home.

The mathematicians told them finally what they already knew in their hearts. Fehar was as lost to them as their own youth. Now they had a choice.

They could go on with the voyage until the last one died and The Ship went rushing on untended at its terrible velocity, a potential force great enough to vaporize a star and all its worlds and peoples. Or they could stop here, laying up The Ship and letting it drift with the slow galactic tides until somewhere, sometime, a race of men might find it and find a use for all the vast store of knowledge they had bought at the cost of their thousand and three lives, so that it would not all be lost. So that even, some day, word might be taken back to Fehar of how the voyage had ended.

They chose the latter way.

*We have taken care that everything should be preserved. The Ship is ready to live again at a touch, so that wherever she may be found she need not suffer the shame of being taken as a derelict — this ship that would have completed the circle of the galaxy if her weak human crew had not*

failed her!

*We have made this mental record — I, Nen - sur, was chosen to make the actual recording because I am now the senior officer of those few who remain. Vi - shan, the senior engineer, will now instruct you in the operation of The Ship. After that we shall take our places, the last nineteen of us, at the hatch which will be opened to exhaust the air.*

*It will be a quick death. And we go proudly. We failed, but not through cowardice or faintness of will. What we did accomplish is more than men have ever done before. We are content. And to you, the unknown and unknowable men of an alien star to whom I speak, we bequeath our pride. Do not betray it!*

Silence.

THE MIND of Ross Farrel began feebly to reassert itself. Then he realized that the engineer Vi - shan was speaking, detailing the simple operations by which The Ship's almost entirely automatic machinery could be reactivated. And this was more important than all the glorious panoramas of star - streams and nebulae, all the human implications of splendid defeat. He listened.

Beside him Croy and Friedman were listening too. But Tolti wept.

When the mental record ceased

Farrel and the others stood where they were for a moment, still dazed and shaken. Then Croy said hoarsely, "Did you get all that? About starting the pile and the air - plant and all."

"Yeah," said Friedman. "I got it."

So had Farrel.

"Then let's get the hell busy."

Croy and Friedman ran out of the room. Farrel, coming after them with Tolti, picked up one of the peepers from the rack.

Back down in the heart of The Ship, while Croy and Friedman told the others what had happened and then got them to work on the preliminaries, Farrel gave the peeper to Victor and told him to get it going.

"We need to know what those bastards out there are doing," he said, nodding toward where the tugs of Benson's fleet must be outside the hull. "If Whitmer and Benson are figuring some way to louse us up we ought to know it."

Victor grunted and went off to one side, where he began the effort of hooking the fine terminals to a spare torch - battery, cursing the clumsiness of his gauntleted hands.

Farrel, still feeling eerily that he was two men in one body, joined the others on the power complex.

The people of The Ship had done well. In what seemed like an in-



credibly short time the great cold-fusion furnace was turning the long - silent dynamos and the atmosphere plant was operating. They waited, panting over the vitiated air in their suits, watching the tell - tales rise as pressure built up in the vast spaces of The Ship, driven by the monstrous pumps. The engineer Vi - shan had given the chemical content of their normal atmosphere, and it was close enough to Earth's to be safely breathable. The men of Fehar must have been very human in their bodies as well as their emotions.

Farrel watched the gauges, with his lungs laboring and his throat on fire, and finally when he had to breathe or die he flung off his helmet and there was air — thin, odd - smelling, still bitterly cold because the heating units had had a long way to go, but air.

Just when he was feeling happy about it, dancing around in a kind of feeble jig with the others while their breath steamed and it seemed as though they might be going to survive after all, Victor came up and said,

"I been listening. The tugs are already hooked on and they'll have The Ship out of her orbit before long, with the start we've already given them. Meantime, they got to get rid of our bodies. Besides, Whitmer and Benson and Leach

just can't wait to see what they've got inside here. They figure we're dead by now so we won't give them any trouble. They're just now coming with a crew to try and cut in through that hatch."

## CHAPTER X

SOME TWO HOURS LATER, dressed again in their vac - suits but with oxygen cylinders recharged, Farrel and eight other men — all that could be spared — stood in the dark hold through which they had first entered The Ship. The rest of the great craft was lighted now. The men of Fehar had closed all the protective shutters before they took their last step into space, so that no light showed from outside the hull to give warning, and they needed it for what they were planning to do.

In the hold it was pitch dark and the inner door was sealed. The air had been pumped out. Now for almost an hour they had waited, feeling the vibrations of enormous effort around the hatch transmitted faintly through the hull. Several times as they watched the hatch glowed brightly through cherry - red to white, but it did not melt or show any signs of weakening.

Farrel grinned, a bitter and humorless expression that was almost a snarl. He was remembering what

Whitmer and Leach had done to him in the hope of this moment, and what they and Benson had done together to a lot of better men.

He switched on his torch and blinked it three time as a signal — their helmet radios were off. Then he swung the beam to center on the huge wheel of the manual hatch control. He walked toward it and Victor walked beside him. The others disposed themselves on the deck here and there and lay still. But each one of them had a weapon in his hand, something hard and heavy.

The torch-beam went out.

Farrel and Victor took hold of the wheel and turned it, a quarter turn.

Instantly the vibrations from above were doubled in strength. Farrel smiled. He turned the wheel a little farther and then left it free. He crouched down beside the wheel, as though he had died trying to open the hatch again. Victor lay down near him.

The crew outside the hull worked like madmen on the hatch, forcing it open. Farrel could sense the slow turning of the wheel and then he could see a glare of bluish light from a work flare and there was an opening in the hull.

Someone leaned in and probed around with the beam of a powerful light. Then beam went around

two or three times, picking out the inert forms in the hold and making sure there was no reaction. Then the someone came in, half jumping, half floating in the light gravity, to the deck. Others followed. Farrel counted. Seven came down, and then no more. For once the odds were on their side.

He jumped up and sprang at the nearest man and hit him hard on top of the helmet with a heavy iron tool he had brought from one of the machine - shops down below.

For quite a while then in the dark, amid the erratic slashing beams of torches that gyrated as the men who held them fought or tried to run, there was an intense and silent confusion.

Farrel's move was the signal. The others rose from the deck and flung themselves on Benson's astounded party. Victor grabbed the wheel and tried to wrestle the hatch cover shut again and another man joined him. Something hit Farrel a crashing blow and knocked him back and he thought for a minute his suit was torn. Then he saw a man leaping frantically upward toward the closing aperture of the hatch and he leaped too and caught the man's boot in mid - air and dragged him down again and they fought in the curious balloon - like fashion of men in low gravity.

Three times he was aware of

the flash of a gun going off. But apparently only a few of the party were armed and some of them must have been taken by surprise in that first onslaught, when the "dead" men had sprung up and attacked them. Four out of the seven were already down.

**F**ARREL HIT the helmet of the man he was grappling with twice very hard with the iron tool and the man sagged over and fell, knocked out by the concussion. Then the hatch had swung shut again and there was no escape. Farrel saw that the last two of Benson's party were being subdued. One of his own men had been killed by gunfire, but the trap had been so unexpected and the fight for that reason over so soon that that was the only casualty.

Farrel went over and pounded on the sealed door into the corridor.

The lights came on, recessed tubes set in the curving wall. The pumps began to force air back into the hold. Pretty soon Farrel could hear the men who had been left outside the hatch battering frantically to get in.

In a few minutes more the door opened and Carlucci signalled that it was all right to take their helmets off. They did, stripping their suits one by one while others stood by with the captured guns,

on guard. Then they made the prisoners do the same. Farrel watched, anxious to see what faces emerged from the obscuring helmets.

Whitmer was there. And Leach.

Whitmer looked at Farrel as though he wished now he had killed him when he had the chance, but he shut his jaw tight and said nothing. He was thinking, figuring, waiting until he knew more of this situation.

Leach was less patient. His face was red and ugly, and when he saw Farrel he did not waste any time in speech. He went for him. Farrel let him almost get his hands on him, and then he hit Leach with everything he had. Leach did not quite go down. But he did not make any more attempt to fight when one of the men caught his collar and hauled him back into line again.

"Which one of you is Benson?" Farrel asked.

A broad blocky man with gray hair and a granite face said, "I am."

He was looking at the lights and smelling the air.

Farrel said, "Okay, take the rest of them and lock them up. You and Whitmer come with me."

Carlucci and Victor, with guns, fell in as a guard behind them. Farrel led the way swiftly along corridors and down escalators — which were working now — toward

the central part of The Ship, above the power plant and forward of it.

Benson said, "I wouldn't have thought any of it would still be operative."

Farrel did not answer, and Benson shrugged. But he and Whitmer both looked around eagerly at every step, their eyes shining with greed and exasperation. Presently Farrel led the way into a large cabin, handsome in an alien fashion but sober and well - worn. Croy sat behind the broad low desk. Friedman was beside him, standing. Here the captain of The Ship had lived.

Tolti, sitting in an attitude of strained anxiety in a corner, jumped up as Farrel came in. He smiled at her and she smiled back and sat down again.

Farrel said to Croy, "We got them." He told their names, and Croy looked at them as though he had found them in a piece of rotten meat.

Benson met his eye without embarrassment. "It seems to be about time for a top - level discussion," he said. "You have us, but we have you. My tugs are hooked on. The Ship is already edging out of her orbit, and it won't be long before we're on our way — whether I get back to my flagship or not. They won't stop because of that. So I'd say we

could start thinking about a deal."

He glanced at Whitmer. "What would you say?"

Whitmer said coolly, "I'd say there's enough to go around. In fact, if you people hadn't been so greedy in the first place all this trouble might have been avoided."

"Sure," said Croy. "You could have stolen The Ship all for yourselves and never had to share a nickel of it. What kind of a deal?"

"Double shares against your not bothering the authorities with any of our private quarrels. The salvage business is a rough game, we all know that. People get hurt. You can't help it." He looked around the cabin. "There seems to be more here than I'd figured even. It's promising. You've got light, air, and heat already, from The Ship's own power —"

As an apparent afterthought he asked, "What are you going to do for food and water?"

"The synthesizers all work," said Croy. "We don't need any of your supplies."

THE SHIP QUIVERED slightly, shifting and creaking as the strains of countless years were altered. Distant boomings and clatterings echoed faint and hollow down the labyrinthine corridors and through the empty spaces.

Benson smiled. "You see? I told you the work would go on.

And my men will have the whole time before we make Ganymede to find some way to get in through the hull. You can't keep us prisoner forever. And if you kill us you'll have more to explain than we will."

"It's a good deal," said Whitmer. "You'd better take it."

The Ship quivered and creaked again, nudging farther and farther out of her age-old orbit.

Croy said, "Perhaps. Come on in here and we'll talk about it."

He got up and went with Friedman through a door, and the others followed.

They stood now in the bridge, the brain center that controlled the pounding heart below. The lights on the main board glowed. Benson saw them and his face tightened, but he did not say anything. Friedman went and switched on the screens that were all around the circular room. Farrel took his place beside Croy. Carlucci and Victor remained with the guns trained on the prisoners. Tolti came in quietly and went up and stood beside Farrel.

The screens warmed and sprang to life, showing space and stars, the ponderous bulk of The Ship, the sturdy little tugs laboring with a rhythmic flaring of blasts to warp that mighty bow around — the bow that had forged more than half way around the galaxy.

"Now," said Croy, and pushed a lever, and then another. Farrel put his hand on the auxiliary board and waited. His heart was pounding as Nen-sur's hand had and the queer duality was on him again. He thought of a world and a sun he had never seen, and a crowd of ships signalling farewell. Far beneath his feet the mighty drives of The Ship stirred and roused to life. The decks quivered. Slowly, ponderously, with immense pride, The Ship began to move —

Benson and Whitmer cried out furiously, but Farrel hardly heard them. He was speaking across a deep dark gulf to Nen-sur, saying, *It is as you wished.*

And the great drives of The Ship beat stronger and stronger, and she moved and flung away the impertinent tugs from her flank and left them far behind as if they had never existed. The great dark bow like an iron mountain swung and pointed toward the distant sun, and The Ship was finishing her voyage.

Once more Tolti's eyes shone with tears. Farrel put his arm around her, knowing that she was thinking of Nen-sur too, and the thousand and three young men who had gone out from Fehar so long ago.

Probably, Farrel thought, The Ship would never see her home world again. But because of the

gallantry and forethought of the men who had sailed her on that brave and foredoomed voyage, the children of Sol would reach the stars much sooner and voyage farther than they could ever have done without her. From her they would learn all they needed to know of drives and power and the

far - flung starlanes, and from her men they would learn what kind of hearts and minds were needed, to fly the ships they would build.

Someday, Farrel knew, a ship would touch at Fehar, and across a galaxy a proud memory would come home at last.

THE END

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## ★ *Stormy Weather* ★

THE DEW LINE RADAR fence awaits the hurtling rockets; the picket boats at sea endlessly scan the surface for hostile craft. This picture is the common, comforting one we have, visualizing the all-weather fighters ready to pounce on the rash intruder.

There is a radar system along the East Coast which watches the skies with even more intensity—if that is possible—than those who watch for planes. Men huddle before huge radar screens and bend over large plotting boards. Cryptic notations are jotted down and in the dim lit room the eerie scene seems Dante-esque.

What is the possible target?

Hurricane! . . .

These killers, these murderous blasts of high velocity air laden with the power of a hundred thousand atomic bombs come roaring in on the unwary. We've seen what has happened this year.

Weathermen, Coast Guardsmen, scientists think that someday the Hurricane and its land-borne bro-

ther, the tornado will succumb to some yet unknown elimination technique.

Until that time there is only one defense—warning! Warning is a defense because it gives time to flee, time to prepare, time to erect barricades against water, bolster walls, and—save people.

The constant alertness of a radio-radar net is required to catch these fast moving swirls of wind. They must be tracked every minute or they'll slip through the time-void that ignored them.

Radar, both from land and from ranging aircraft is able to identify the hurricane precisely and follow it to its destination or its natural destruction.

Radar is faster than the hurricane fortunately, and so as the system comes into full play, it is possible to predict a time when a warning will never be missed.

It won't be many years either before the power of atomic energy proves itself as the hurricane's "eye-destroyer . . ."



"The trouble is that after they pass these tests they're all washed up."

Everybody hated the Moxies. But that was only natural since who likes an invader? This was the feeling when two aliens entered the —

# TRUCKSTOP

by

*Rog Phillips*

THE HUGE IPX TRACTOR trailer turned off the highway onto the gravel, its diesels roaring and snorting, black smoke pouring from its verticle exhaust pipe to blend with the darkness. It pulled in beside four other trucks, of boxcar proportions, aluminum sides glistening in the reflected lights of the cafe.

With a final cough the diesels died. A second later the airbrakes snorted and the headlights and pattern of red lights shut off.

There was the slam of a truck door in the dark silence, and the crunch of gravel as the truck driver went toward the door of the cafe. Before he got there the door opened, juke box music erupting into the night, as a man and woman came out and got into a dusty sedan, ready to continue their journey.

There was a sharply indrawn

gasp from the woman. She pointed upward and cried, "Look!"

The truckdriver paused and looked up into the cloudless summer sky at the elongating streak of white fire cutting an arc across the sky toward the west.

"Another Moxy ship," he said. "Second one I've seen tonight."

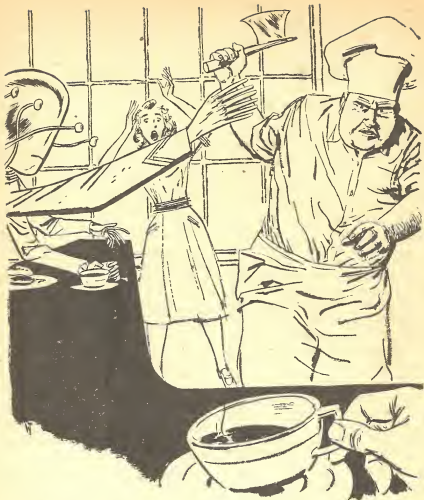
"We saw the other one too," the man said. "They must be landing in Nevada."

"Guess so," the truckdriver said. "They've moved all the people out of Nevada except around Reno. You heading west? You have to stay on 66, you know. Can't take in the Grand Canyon now."

"We know," the man said, getting into the car.

The truckdriver pushed open the door and went into the cafe. The jukebox was silent now in the low ceilinged room. Chair backed stools with worn plastic seats lined





the U shaped counter.

"Hi, Jo," the truckdriver said to the blonde behind the counter.

"Well, hello, Frank!" she said,

smiling brightly. "It's been two weeks, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, taking a seat at the counter. "Had to take a load

to Philly from Chi last week."

"Hi, Frank," one of a group of four truckdrivers at the opposite counter said. "Run into any of the Moxies yet?"

"Nary a one," Frank said. Then, to Jo, "The Chicken fried steak."

"Chicken fry!" she called to the kitchen. Then, "One of the boys this afternoon said there's some Moxies at Holbrook. He saw them but rolled on through. They didn't stop him. He was scared stiff."

"Why?" Frank said. "The way I see it we never had it so good."

Jo gasped. "You don't *mean* that!" she said.

"Maybe not," Frank said, suddenly sober. "They did wipe out Chicago and San Francisco didn't they. Twenty million people. But now there won't be any more wars. That's why they came here — to police our planet."

"So they say," the cook said, sticking his head out of the kitchen. "But you wait and see. They moved everyone out of Nevada didn't they? Arizona is next. Then New Mexico. Where is everybody going to go?" He ducked his head out of sight again.

Jo set a cup of coffee in front of Frank. "Maybe I'll hitch a ride east with you on your way back," she said, "If you get back this way from L.A."

Frank shook his head. "I'm not going to L.A. this trip," he said.

"Not going to L.A.?" one of the four truckdrivers at the opposite counter said. "Diego then?"

Frank shook his head.

"Where, then?" the man persisted.

Frank opened his mouth to reply, then closed it quickly and gulped as the door from outside opened and a sharply pungent odor spread through the cafe.

Two Moxies entered and closed the door.

THE PICTURES in the papers, the closeups on color TV, had prepared no one for the reality. The eight eternally moving six inch stalks tipped with eyes, ringing the upper part of the head of each Moxy portrayed alert intelligence in their slightest motion as they twisted in this and that direction, independent at times, yet suddenly coordinating any two of them as a pair so that it was evident the eight visual centers of the mind could coordinate in any combination dictated by the momentary interest.

From the shoulders rose four slender antennae on each side, so perfect that they seemed machined, yet each a different length and thickness, and all bright yellow as though painted.

Above the eye stalks bulged a smooth brown dome suggestive of a doorknob. The face of each Moxy

was, on the upper half, a pair of flaring breathing holes similar to the contours of a human ear, and the lower half of the face was mostly mouth, with lantern jaw, a slightly darker shade of brown than the cranium.

They had two pairs of arms, the upper arms smaller than human, the lower ones, coming out from the approximate location of the waist, slightly longer.

They walked upright on short legs. They were wearing olive drab uniforms suggestive of human military uniforms. They were about five and a half feet tall to the top of their heads, and partly exoskeletal and partly endoskeletal. Their hands were flesh and almost human in shape, but with seven fingers, long and fragile. Their faces were exoskeletal, and, looking at them, one forgot their eyestalks and gained the impression that the Moxies had no eyes.

The odor was penetrating, and was a blend of fermentation and spices.

They came to the counter and, placing one middle hand on the counter and the other on the back of the stool, casually lifted themselves up and sat down.

"Two hamburgers, please," an entirely human voice with no trace of foreign accent said, and the only indication of its origin was the blurring of the antennae of

one of them while the words were being spoken.

"H-hamburgers?" Jo asked, her voice a mixture of fear and amazement.

A pair of wandering eyestalks on each of the Moxies fixed on her disconcertingly. Antennae vibrated again.

"That's right," sounded a voice. The eyestalks took up their wandering again. The other Moxy vibrated his antennae and strange voice sounds came out, fluid and rapidly changing, impossible of limitation by the human voice. They were, obviously, discussing something, these two Moxies.

Frank, and the four truckdrivers on the other side of the counter, continued watching the two aliens. Jo, the waitress, called, "Two burgers!"

From the kitchen came, "Two on the fire. Chicken fry ready."

Jo went into the kitchen and came back, setting the plate in front of Frank. Two pairs of eyestalks followed its progress with interest while the other eyestalks kept up their independent survey in every direction including the ceiling.

Frank dipped into his meal, cutting a generous bite off the steak and shoving it into his mouth with selfconscious awareness of his interested audience.

"Any of you truckdrivers head-

ed for Vegas?" one of the Moxies said.

"Not me!" several voices said hastily.

"I am," Frank said.

"Good," the Moxy said. "We're to inspect your truck and escort you to the turn-off. No hurry though."

The cook stuck his head out of the kitchen and sang, "Two burgers ready —" and his eyes became big and round the instant before he pulled his head back.

A low chuckle sounded from the blurring antennae of both Moxies.

"I thought something smelled funny," came the mumble of the cook's voice from the kitchen, by some miracle of sound distinctly audible throughout the cafe.

There were sharply indrawn breaths, and all eyes watched the two Moxies apprehensively.

Jo went into the kitchen and brought back the two hamburgers and set them down in front of the Moxies. Under the circumstances it was a very brave act.

The truckdriver, Frank, continued eating as though unaware of anything around him, but he was watching everything from the corners of his eyes.

Not a sound came from the kitchen.

THE TWO MOXIES picked up their hamburgers and simul-

taneously took cautious bites from them, their front four eyestalks curving like hooks to permit the four eyes to view the hamburgers close up from four different directions in a manner that made it apparent they were forming actual three dimensional images of them in their minds.

"Our native dish!" Jo said too loudly, her voice on the edge of hysteria, standing in front of the Moxies as though afraid to move away.

"Very delicious," came the reply, the bright yellow antennae of one of the Moxies blurring slightly.

"Yes indeed," came an identical voice, the antennae of the other one blurring.

Jo began to edge imperceptibly away.

"What is your name?"

"Why —" Jo gasped, her hands suddenly clutching each other in an arrested wringing fashion. "My name is Jo. Jo Porter."

"Jo?" It was the Moxy on the left whose antennae were blurring at each sound. "That is a very nice name. You are a female, are you not?"

Abruptly the cook was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, a meat cleaver in his hand, his face pasty white, his eyes flat and glaring. "Leave our women alone or by God I'll use this meat cleaver on you," he said in a quiet,

deadly voice.

The truckdriver, Frank, slammed his fork down on his plate with violence. "Put that meat cleaver back in the kitchen," he shouted. "He didn't mean anything."

"Like hell he didn't," the cook said, his nostrils flaring, his eyes glazing over with a balefulness that was almost a physical force. "Maybe their ships can blast our cities, but if they think they can come around and molest our women —"

"Shut up!" Frank shouted. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Oh I don't, huh," the cook said, advancing a step out of the kitchen doorway and swinging the meat cleaver with slow ease. "You're taking your truck into Nevada are you? Sure you are. You're a yellowbelly traitor to your own race, aren't you."

The cook was breathing heavily, his eyes wild. Suddenly he lifted the meat cleaver over his head and rushed toward Frank. Jo was in his way and tried to stop him. He brushed her aside without taking his eyes off of Frank, going past the two Moxies.

Almost too swift for the eye to follow, one of the Moxies darted out with a middle arm and lifted the meat cleaver from the cook's fist.

The cook rushed another two steps before he came to a halt, a

peculiarly ludicrous expression on his face. He looked up at his empty fist, blinking, then slowly lowered his arm and turned toward the Moxy.

One pair of the Moxy's eyes were watching the cook, another pair the cleaver that he hefted experimentally in his hand.

His antennae blurred, "Quite a vicious weapon, cooky."

One of the four truckdrivers at the other counter burst out laughing.

"Listen, you animated juke box. . ." the cook said, taking a step toward the Moxy.

But now all four of the truckdrivers at the other counter were laughing, and Frank was grinning broadly. Even Jo was smiling nervously.

The tension was broken. The cook searched in his mind for the mood that had animated him the moment before. It was gone. He grinned sheepishly. The way the Moxy hefted the cleaver, the way he had spoken, were too human and matter of fact.

"I guess I lost my temper," the cook growled.

"Quite all right," the Moxy vibrated.

He handed the meat cleaver back to the cook, who blinked his surprise, then took it, looking down at it as though he didn't know what to do with it.

The other Moxy finished eating his hamburger just then, and took a napkin from the dispenser and carefully wiped his lantern jaw, inspecting it with almost doubled eyestalks, then crumpled the napkin and dropped it on his plate.

The cook looked down at the cleaver in his hand again, then up at the Moxy who had just finished his hamburger. "How was the hamburger?" he asked.

"Good!" the Moxy vibrated crisply. "Could I have another?"

"Sure thing," the cook said, seizing gratefully on a course of conduct that gave him something to do. He went back to the kitchen. There was the sound of the refrigerator door opening and closing.

Slowly Jo went up to the counter, looking at the two Moxies.

"Say," she said, "You two are all right!"

"Thanks," both Moxies said gravely.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Jo asked.

"No thank you," one of the Moxies said. "You see, we couldn't very well drink it the way our faces are constructed. Cups are for flexible lips."

"That's true," Jo said. "I hadn't thought of it. I'll tell you what — I could wash out a couple of pop bottles and put some coffee in them."

"Would you?" the Moxy said.

"You see, everything is new to us. We would like to try coffee once and see what it's like."

ALMOST QUIVERING with eagerness, Jo got two empty pop bottles from underneath the counter and washed them, rinsing them generously. Everyone watched while she placed each under the urn faucet and let them fill up about two thirds of the way with the brown liquid.

"There you are," she said cheerfully. "Be careful. It's hot."

Both Moxies lifted the pop bottles and spilled a tentative drop inside their lantern jaws, setting the bottles down again as they became too hot to hold.

"Very good," the antennae of one of the Moxies blurred. "A little like our own *praolyjkszz*. By the way, what is an animated juke box?"

Jo giggled and didn't reply.

"That thing over in the corner is a juke box," Frank spoke up, pointing to the brightly lit Neon and translucent plastic machine. "Here, I'll show you." He fished a dime out of his pocket and put it in the selector nearest him on the back edge of the counter."

The two Moxies remained motionless while the loud music of a Dixieland band blared forth. When the juke box became silent the antennae of one of the Moxies

blurred and a very close imitation of several bars of the music sounded. Then, "Not quite right. Very difficult."

The cook came out of the kitchen, setting fresh hamburgers before the Moxies. "Here you are," he said heartily.

He stood beside Jo, watching while the Moxies ate, and took an occasional swallow of coffee.

"How come," the cook said suddenly, "That you Moxies are here? What do you intend doing to us?"

The silence was abruptly tense again.

"Nothing," one of the Moxies vibrated. "You mean in general, or in particular? Specifically, we two are here only to meet the truck driven by your friend here." He waved a small upper hand in Frank's direction. "In general, to keep you from destroying yourselves during your period of integrating into a planetary unit. We were selected for the job because our species is so divergent from yours that a minimum of racial friction would ensue."

"Well," the cook said, "You keep your hands off our women and there won't be any trouble." He looked around for approval from the truckdrivers, but received only frowns.

"Jim!" Jo said, white with anger, "If you can't be decent go back in the kitchen and stay there!"

"What did I say?" the cook said, dismayed. "All I said was —"

"You said enough!" Jo said. "If you can't behave, leave."

"Are you telling me you *welcome* attentions from these — these —?" He waved a hand toward the Moxies incredulously.

Her anger at white heat, Jo fumbled at the strings of her apron. "That's about enough from you, Jim," she said. "I'm quitting. Give me my pay. I'm getting out of here."

"I wouldn't do that," the Moxy said. "Our presence disturbs him. That is understandable."

"No more than everybody's presence disturbs him," Jo said, taking off her apron and laying it on the counter. "He's jealous of every salesman and truckdriver that stops here. I've had enough. He doesn't own me." She turned to Frank. "Frank, will you give me a lift to town on your truck?"

"Aw now, Jo," the cook objected, "I don't either try to own you, but I can't let every wolf that comes in here paw over you."

The other Moxy's antennae vibrated with a deepthroated chuckle. Then, "I would say Jim is very much in love with you, Jo."

"Well, he picks a fine way of showing it," Jo said.

"Maybe he can't help it," the Moxy said. "You are a very attractive girl and —"

"None of that!" the cook shouted, "Or I'll get my meat cleaver again and use it on you!"

Four eyestalks of the Moxy moved into focus on the cook.

"I'm sure if you tried it," the Moxy's bright yellow antennae quivered, "My husband would use it to make hamburger out of you."

"You — you're *married?*" the cook stuttered, looking from one to the other.

The others were sitting up, looking at the two Moxies, comparing them. The one that had spoken looked exactly like the other, except for slightly different coloring, a lantern jaw not quite so angular.

"Of course," the Moxy vibrated. "We always travel in husband and wife teams."

"Well, I'll be damned," the cook said. "Congratulations," he added as though the two Moxies had just gotten married.

A pair of the Moxies eyes turned to Jo. "Why don't you marry the man?" she vibrated. "He has a nice business here. Together you would probably be quite contented, I'm sure he would stop being so pugnacious. His major motivation at present is a fear of losing you. You should be able to understand that."

Jo's face turned pink.

"Hey, Jo!" one of the four truckdrivers at the other counter said. "I could use some more cof-

fee."

"Okay!" Jo said, getting it with undue concentration on the process. Then she came back and jerked her apron off the counter and put it back on.

"Gee, Jo," the cook said, alternately smiling and looking afraid.

"Don't get any ideas!" Jo snarled, not looking at him. "I'm just working here."

His undecided expression settling into a smile, the cook went back to the kitchen. A moment later there was a rattling of pans and a low musical humming of an anonymous tune.

"Well," Jo said, looking around, her face still pink, "Anyone want more coffee?"

"I'd better be shoving off, Jo," Frank said, getting up from the counter, and laying down a dollar bill and two quarters.

"And we have to inspect your truck before you start, and follow you," the male Moxy vibrated. "How much do we owe you, Jo?"

Jo smiled. "It's on the house," she said.

"Thanks," the Moxy said, "But we have orders to pay for what we get so as not to upset the economy." He reached into a pocket of his uniform and brought out a thick packet of bills, peeling off two new dollar bills and dropping them on the counter. "Keep the



change," he said.

THE TWO MOXIES placed one hand on the counter and the other on the back of the stool and expertly lowered themselves. They went to the door where Frank waited for them, holding it open. There they turned and waved a small upper hand.

"Goodnight," they vibrated in unison.

"Goodnight," Jo sang, smiling.

"Goodnight," the four truckdrivers at the other counter said.

"Come back again and try our chicken fried steak," the cook called from the kitchen doorway.

"Yes," Jo called. "Come back again. Please."

"Thank you, we will," the female Moxy vibrated, three of her eyes focused on Jo for a moment before she turned away.

The two Moxies went out. The truckdriver, Frank, grinned and waved his arm, then followed.

Out here away from the food smells of the cafe, the sharp pungent odor of the Moxies was more pronounced, but not unpleasant at all, Frank decided.

They slowed to a walk beside him. Ahead were the ghostly bulks of the great tractor trailers and the glistening black sedan of the Moxies with the outline of a police blinker light sticking from its roof.

Far up in the cloudless night sky

a streak of light came into existence and lengthened toward the west in a slow arc as luminous as the stars. Faintly, from a far distance, came the faint howl of a coyote.

Down the highway emerged a pair of headlights rushing forward in the night, and the whine of tires on the pavement as the oncoming car hurtled past and the darkness dropped back into place.

"Do you have a flashlight to inspect the load with?" Frank asked.

"Yes," one of the Moxies vibrated.

"Not that it's necessary," Frank added. "You'll find only beef. No bombs."

Frank saw extra eyestalks of the two Moxies jerk around into focus on him, in the dim light.

There was a moment of silence, then, "We aren't worried that *you* will have bombs in your load," one of the Moxies vibrated. "But let me tell you something. We — our race — has done this sort of thing before. Do you expect mankind to give up so easily? Officially, yes. Officially it's a black and white affair. Our overwhelming force brought unconditional surrender from all Earth governments. But that's just the beginning.

"There will be the underground, hating us no matter how much good we do just because we aren't human. There will be those who be-

lieve in *Homo Supremus* who can't stand the thought of non-humans of equal intelligence. Those elements of humanity—perhaps for several generations—will fight us any way they can, always hoping, never giving up until the inexorableness of time itself wipes them out.

"They can't win, but they can try. Maybe they haven't started yet. Maybe your truck hasn't been tampered with. Or maybe someone put a nuclear bomb inside your truck while we were all in the cafe, fixed so that it will trigger when the rear doors are opened. Maybe a different trailer is on your tractor now. One that's a solid thermo-nuclear bomb capable of destroying everything within a radius of two hundred miles. Or maybe they have slipped in and sprinkled the beef with one of the terribly swift and deadly diseases that could nearly wipe out the occupation forces before it was stopped. If so, whatever happens will happen here, in this isolated place, this lonely truck-stop, a safe distance from our base."

"But what about the people in the cafe?" Frank said. "If there's a bomb..."

"They'd never know what happened—just as we wouldn't. If we drove somewhere else before looking, and there was a bomb in your load, it would be other people who would be the victims."

One of the Moxies went to the sedan and brought out two flash-lights.

On the western horizon a streak of fire climbed upward, a Moxy ship departing from the Earth. The faint howl of a coyote sounded again.

Frank looked up at the dark bulk of the doors of his trailer, visualizing the tons of beef packed into its refrigerated interior, finding it difficult to breathe.

"Okay, open up," one of the Moxies vibrated softly.

Frank's face was a gray patch in the semi-darkness as he stared at the two unhuman figures. He took a deep shuddering breath, reached for the handle that would open the truck doors, then dropped his hand.

"I can't do it," he said, shaking his head.

"Why not?" The two Moxies looked at him from pairs of widely separated eyes.

Frank's mouth twisted into a crooked, defeated smile. "Maybe because it would be such a waste to get only two of you," he said. "Maybe because you seem to like hamburgers. How should I know why? That beef is loaded with a virus that would kill both of you in less than an hour and not hurt me at all. My orders were that if you insisted on inspection out here I was to let you, then play along

until you died, then escape with the load so your scientists couldn't find out what the virus is and devise a cure." He sighed. "For some reason I can't go through with it."

"Why not?" the Moxy reiterated. "That's what interests us."

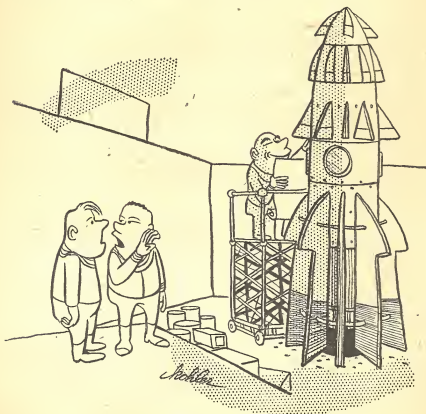
"Don't ask me!" Frank said.

"I don't know. Or—yes, I do know."

"Then why?" the Moxy asked.

"Because," Frank said, "Inside your alien exteriors you two are—*human*."

"On the contrary," came softly from the vibrating antennae, "*You* are—*moxy*!"



"Did he design it for us — or Detroit?"

If you like a man you don't question how he was born. But on Deneb City there was a deep hatred for synthetics, so rioters went out on—

# The Android Kill

by

*Alexander Blade*

I WAS CRAZY TO LEAVE

*Laura here alone for a minute,*  
I was thinking, as the space-liner roared through the atmosphere toward the spaceport at Deneb City. Even though the mighty ship was travelling at a thousand miles an hour, I kept urging it onward, down toward the port. *I had* to get there on time. *Had* to.

I kept picturing the way the riot-torn city must look, now that the long-festering hatred for synthetic android men had burst loose into a full-scale android kill. Clay Armistead had finally stirred up the riot his sick mind craved. And I had picked this week to make a business trip and leave my wife alone—alone, in the heart of the riot.

I counted the seconds until the spaceship would land. I had cut short my business trip the second I had heard of the riots, had caught the first liner back to Deneb

City to find Laura and get her out of danger's path.

The ship landed. "*Unfasten deceleration cradles,*" came the impersonal order from the loudspeakers, but I had already done that. I raced down the companionway, past a startled stewardess, shoved my way through a little knot of uniformed baggage-androids, and grabbed my suitcase. There wasn't any time to waste.

Quickly, the moment the catwalk for passengers was open, I dashed through the hatch and out into the bright, warm air of Deneb City. The giant sun was high above; it was a pleasant spring day.

And then all the pleasantness vanished. I saw the mob, pushing and shouting and shoving, at the far end of the landing field. It was an ugly sight. They looked like so many buzzing bees, each of them inflamed with killing-lust and brutality.



I passed through the checkout-desk in record time and on through the Administration Building, listening to the sounds of the mob. Somehow, they had smelled out the fact that there were androids aboard the starship that had just arrived, and they were determined to get them.

Well, that wasn't my worry. I was concerned only with Laura.

A sleek taxi pulled up in front

of me and waited, its turboelectric engine throbbing quietly. The driver was a human; I was startled not to see the familiar red star on his forehead. He looked at me coldly, without the politeness of the android cabby.

"Where to, fellow?"

"Twenty-fourth and Coolidge," I said, and started to get in. "On the double."

"Sorry, Mac. Coolidge is out of

bounds. I'd be crazy to take my hack through there. I'll drop you at Winchester. Okay?"

I frowned, then nodded. It meant a ten-minute walk, but it was better than nothing. "Good enough," I said, and started for a second time to enter.

I got one leg inside the cab. Then a hand grabbed me from behind, pulled me out, and I was swung around.

"Where the hell you think you're going - - you damned *android*?"

FOR A SECOND, I was too startled even to get angry. There were three men facing me — cold-eyed, hard-faced men with hatred naked in their features. I recognized them, contorted though their faces were.

Clay Armistead — the chief rabble-rouser, a burly, squat, ugly man who had been spreading lies about the synthetic men for years.

Roger Dubrow, tall, athletic, Armistead's partner in their food-store business and his partner in villainy as well, it seemed.

Dave Hawks, a local tough just riding along for the fun.

"Android?" I said. "Is this a game, Armistead? You've known me for ten years. I'm no more of an android than you are. Let go of me!"

I wrenched my arm free and turned back to my taxi — but

the driver shook his head nervously and stepped on the accelerator. *He* wasn't looking for trouble.

"Come here, android," Hawks said. "C'mere and lemme rough you up." He snatched at my suitcase, grabbed it away, tossed it to one side.

"Hold it, Hawks." I looked from one face to the next. They looked alike — cold, menacing, ugly. "You know as well as I do that androids have red stars on their foreheads. Stop this nonsense and go play your games elsewhere."

I still couldn't take then seriously. It was impossible for an android to masquerade as a human, and they knew it. Why were they accusing me, then? It was fantastic.

"Those red stars can be obliterated, Preston," Armistead said, in a cold, tight voice. "It's a secret the androids have kept for years. But now we know. We know you're synthetic, Preston. And we're going to get you!"

It was incredible. It was unbelievable. But it was happening, here in my own city, on the world where I'd lived all my life. And suddenly, I was fighting for my life against three of my neighbors who were positive I was a synthetic man!

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dave Hawks moving on me. The sounds of the mob were chil-

lingly close, and I knew I'd be in for trouble for sure if the entire swarm got here while the three ringleaders were working someone over. I'd be ripped to pieces.

Hawks closed and swung. His punch landed above my eye. I blinked away the pain and crashed a fist into his midsection. At the same time, Dubrow joined in. Armistead held back and watched.

An open-handed blow from Dubrow knocked me sprawling.

"Look at the android," Dubrow gloated. "Look at him flat on his back!"

I kicked upward viciously and sent Dubrow over backward screaming in pain. Hawks dove savagely, and we went rolling over and over. I was getting numb from the fighting; all I wanted to do was find Laura and get out of this madhouse, and instead —

"Finish him off!" Armistead hissed. "The cops are coming!"

Sirens wailed. The Deneb City police — badly outnumbered, unable to handle the rioting in its full intensity — had heard of the outbreak at the spaceport and were on their way. Dubrow and Hawks clung to me, their fists pounding into me. I struck back, blindly, clawing, scratching, kicking. Blood trickled down my face — *real* blood. Human blood. But they didn't care.

"Come on, android! Fight!" A

palm crashed into my cheek; another into my throat. Choking, gasping, I rose to my feet with desperate determination. My clothes were in tatters, my suitcase gone.

I grabbed Hawks, swung the burly man around, sent him crashing into Dubrow and Armistead. Without waiting to see what would happen, I began to run. Just run, blindly, without direction. Running away. I was running for my life, and I still didn't quite believe it was all happening.

**I** RAN. I RAN THROUGH the tangled mob of people, through the screaming, yelling, hysterical android-hating people of Deneb City. Bullets whined overhead, and here and there I could see the bright flash of a disruptor-pistol warning the outraged crowd back. There was no stopping them.

I kept running. I reached the fence that bordered the spaceport, ran until I found an exit gate. There was a guard patrolling it, but I went by so fast he didn't know what had happened.

My heart was pounding and my lungs seemed to be quivering under the strain. And right down in my stomach was a cold hard knot of fear. Not so much for myself directly — I was too numb for that. But I was afraid for Laura.

"Do you *have* to go to Trantor, darling?" she had asked. "I'll

miss you."

"I'll miss you too, darling," and it had been the truth. "But we can't afford for both of us to go — and I can't afford *not* to go. You know that."

"I know, all right. But still—"

I had left her behind, and had been gone eight days. Only eight days — but in that time, Clay Armistead had fanned the smoldering human-android antagonism into a full-scale android kill.

The streets were nearly deserted as I raced into the heart of Deneb City. Up ahead, I could see fires burning — fires, no doubt, coming from shops of android shopkeepers. We had tried to live side by side, androids and men, identical in everything except birth, but it seemed doomed to failure.

I kept running, my legs moving almost mechanically. I passed one of the burning stores. It was John Nealey's beauty salon, and in the smoke and fiery shadows I could see figures moving about.

Someone emerged, face covered with soot. It was Lloyd Garber, a sedate, wealthy accountant — now wild-eyed with fury. He saw me.

"Hey, Preston! Come give us a hand!"

I stopped. "Are you mixed up in this too, Garber?"

"We've got Nealey in here," Garber said, ignoring my question. "We're making him watch while

we burn his store. We need some help."

As Garber spoke, an expensive hairdrying machine came hurtling through the open door. There was a scream of anguish from within, and I thought I recognized the voice of android John Nealey, ladies' hairdresser extraordinary. Androids tended to go into unmasculine business like that, I thought. Maybe that was why people like Clay Armistead hated them so.

I paused, wondering if I should take time out to help Nealey, when another soot-smearred figure emerged from the store. He was so blackened I couldn't recognize him, but he waved his arm as soon as he saw me.

"Hey Garber — there's Cleve Preston!"

"Yeah, I know," Garber replied. "I was just —"

"Didn't you hear what Armistead said? Preston's an android! He's been hiding the red star all his life!"

"What? But I —"

I didn't stick around to see what would happen. Nealey would have to fend for himself. I dodged around the corner and ran as fast as I could. Footsteps pursued me for a while, and then I was alone. I kept on running.

It was a nightmare. The city was totally gripped by the android kill. How many of the inoffensive



synthetic men were dead already I had no way of knowing — but I was sure Armistead and his men would not rest until every red-starred forehead had felt the boot.

*And why me?* Why had Armistead suddenly decided I was an android, and made me the object of hatred along with the true synthetics? For a dizzy moment I nearly began to feel like an android myself.

There had been other android kills before, on other planets, in other cities. I had read about them; I had sympathized with the persecuted underdogs, had felt, gratitude that it wasn't happening here, to me and my family.

But now it *had* happened here — and it was happening to me. I was one of the hunted now, and a chill gripped me as I tried not to think of Laura's probable fate.

Blind, unreasoning hatred was on the loose in Deneb City. And there was nothing I could do but run.

**I** REACHED MY HOME about an hour later — or rather, what *had* been my home.

In the slanting late-afternoon shadows, it was a sight that nearly made me cry. I had bought an inexpensive but attractive bubble-home six years before, when Laura and I were married. It hadn't been much, but it had been ours. It *had* been.

Now, it looked as if it had been in the path of a juggernaut. The door was smashed in, the interior charred and seared, the furnishings torn, books and drapes and chairs floating in puddles of dirty water. I moved from room to room, numb, too numb to cry.

Chalked on the wall of the room that had been my study was a simple message:

ANDROIDS DON'T DESERVE  
TO LIVE LIKE THIS

— C. A.

C.A. — Clay Armistead! And again the accusation of android.

My home destroyed, my wife kidnapped or dead, I walked dazedly down the steps to the street and slouched at the edge of the curb. Night was coming now, and the four moons glittered coldly above, shining without sympathy. There was no sympathy in the world, I thought — only hatred.

I had lost everything I loved within eight days. In the distance, I heard the sound of shouting and killing. It was quiet here, in the residential district of Deneb City, but I could imagine what it must have been like the day they did *this* to my home.

As I sat slouched there, a voice from above me said, "It's a tough break, Preston."

I spun to my feet instantly and turned to face the speaker. It was Ken Carpenter, my next-door

neighbor, who stood above me. I reached out and grabbed him by the throat.

"Go ahead, Carpenter — call me an android too! Pull out a gun and kill me! You can't take anything else from me!"

"Whoa!" Carpenter said, in a choked voice. "Easy, Cleve. I had nothing to do with this."

Suspiciously, I released my grip. He rubbed his throat for a moment or two. "You're pretty quick on the trigger, aren't you?"

"I have to be," I said. "In the last couple of hours I've learned it's the only way to stay alive."

"I guess you're right," Carpenter said. "I don't blame you for wanting to kill, either." He shook his head sadly. "I watched the whole thing, Cleve. It was awful."

His face was red, and he couldn't meet my eyes. "You helped, didn't you?" I asked. I wasn't even angry.

He said nothing, but words weren't necessary. I could see the guilt-unconcealed on his face.

After a pause he spoke. "I had to," he said hoarsely. "They — they came here. Armistead asked me to help." He lowered his head. "They would have done the same thing to my house if I refused. I — I had to, Cleve."

"Okay," I said. "You've got a wife and family too. I won't hold any grudge." It was the truth. I

might have done the same thing. If Carpenter had made any move to save my house, he would only have brought destruction needlessly on his own head.

I moistened dry lips. "Tell me where Laura is," I said.

"Armistead took her away," Carpenter said quietly.

"Took her away? Where?"

"Just before they burned your house," said Carpenter. "Armistead went in himself and came out with your wife. They put her in a car and drove away with her."

"They didn't hurt her?"

Carpenter shook his head. "She gave them quite a fight, but I didn't see them hurt her. They just took her away."

"You know they're calling me an android, don't you?" I asked.

He nodded. "Armistead started spreading that around yesterday afternoon. There was a big gang outside your house, and they took Laura away. I went outside to find out what was happening, and Armistead said they were going to burn your place because you're an android." He looked at me suspiciously for a second. "It's not true, is it? I mean —"

"No, it's not true!" I said angrily. "How did all this start? This riot, I mean."

"Well, you know how it's been between humans and androids here — sort of an uneasy truce

for years. And you know how Armistead feels about equal rights for them. Well, two days ago an android murdered Mary Cartwright."

"What?"

Mary was another neighbor of ours, a young housewife from down the block. She was a good friend of Laura's; they spent a lot of time together.

"But Mary was in favor of android equality," I said in confusion. "Why would —"

Carpenter shrugged. "It happened, that's all. It was a particularly vicious murder. As soon as word got around, Armistead got up and said it was time we got rid of the androids in Deneb City, before they killed the rest of us."

I was stunned. The androids were peaceful, likable folk, who kept to themselves and were well aware of the consequences of an act such as this. "How do they know it was an android?" I asked. "Are they sure?"

"Positive. The android was caught in the act."

"By whom?"

"Armistead. He —"

"That's enough," I said in sudden disgust. The whole crude plot was painfully obvious now. Armistead had Mary Cartwright murdered by his own henchmen, and had framed an android.

He had then used this "evidence"

as provocation to touch off an android kill — and the reign of terror was still going on. The municipal authorities were probably paralyzed; the police force was pitifully inadequate, and in all likelihood half of them had joined the rioters anyway.

Anti-android hatred was an easy thing to stir up. The synthetic men and women were too handsome, too intelligent, too perfect — too easy to envy and to hate. The three centuries since their development had been marked by a steady history of riots such as this one.

Only now it was here, right here, and I was caught up in the middle of it.

And Laura? Where was she?

Suddenly I felt the desire to wring Clay Armistead's thick neck.

I STARTED TO WALK, without knowing where I was going. I just felt that I had to get moving, to walk off the overpowering frustration and fear and hate I was feeling.

Half an hour later, I found myself in a part of Deneb City I had never been in before — the oldest part of town, almost a slum. Here things were quiet. There was no sign of the rioters. Maybe the riot was dying down finally; maybe all the androids were dead or in hiding.

It was now night. The air was

becoming chilly, and I felt cold and alone.

A figure moved in front of me. Someone was lurking in the shadows. Instantly, I went on guard.

The prowler was circling toward me in the dimness, and I saw the gleam of a knife suddenly against the dull black of the night. I poised myself and waited for the attack. I was becoming accustomed to violence as the normal activity of life.

Curiously, the man in the shadows remained there. We froze, boxing each other in uneasily, each waiting for the other to spring. Finally he stepped forward, knife upraised.

I moved forward to meet him, and as the knife descended my hand shot up to intercept the other's arm. I clamped my hand around his wrist and held him there. We stared into each other's faces.

In the flickering light of the four moons I could see him plainly. His features were even and regular, and he would have been handsome but for the raw, jagged gash across one cheek. Imprinted in the center of his forehead was a neat, five-pointed red star.

He was an android.

"You're Cleve Preston, aren't you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You can let go of me, then. I

won't stab you." There was something in his voice that made me trust him, and I let go. He sheathed the knife and looked curiously at me. "So you're one of us! I heard Armistead shouting it."

"Sorry," I said. "You're wrong. I'm no more an android than Armistead is. He's just framing me for some motive of his own."

"But —"

As the knife started to raise again, I quickly said, "But I'm on your side! I'm being hunted like an android, and so I'm fighting like one. I'm with you, whoever you are."

"George Huntley," the android said. "I thought you were a human — I mean, one of the rioters. I couldn't take any chances. I've been hiding in the back alleys here ever since the thing started."

"I understand."

"They took your wife, didn't they?" he asked suddenly.

"How did you know?"

"I saw them," he said. "She's in Armistead's headquarters. His supermarket. That's the headquarters for the whole thing, you know."

The supermarket was in the heart of town, about half an hour's quick walk further on. "The place must be guarded," I said. "Can we get in?"

"They'll kill you on sight!" Huntley said.

"I have to get in there," I told him. "My wife is in there. Do you understand that? My wife?"

"Yes, but — all right, come on! I'll help if I can."

IT WAS A STRANGE alliance — a human being everyone accused of being an android, and a genuine android whose life was forfeit if he got caught. I stood a chance — just a chance.

We arrived at Armistead's supermarket near midnight, approaching it cautiously from the rear. There was a crowd milling around outside, talking and strutting, probably busy telling each other about their day's exploits in killing and looting. I shuddered as I saw them — complaced, proud of their day's work.

"How are we going to get inside?" I asked. "There must be a hundred of them."

He rubbed his forehead nervously, fingering the damning star. Unconsciously, he seemed to be rubbing some of the grime away so the mark of his non-humanity stood out more clearly. "Don't worry," he said. "There's a side window. You go in, and I'll follow you."

"How about the alarm?"

"You want your wife?" the android asked.

"I want to stay alive," I said.

"You will," Huntley said, and prodded me to keep heading forward. After a few minutes he said, "I'd like your wife to get free too."

"What business is it of yours?"

He looked at me squarely. "Androids have brothers," he said. "Vat-mates, really, but we feel a pretty close affection. My brother was the android who supposedly murdered Mary Cartwright. Armistead's butchers cut him down before he could deny it."

"Sorry to hear that," I said.

"You know something else? Your wife was the only witness to the murder of Mary Cartwright."

Suddenly I went stiff all over. The puzzle came clear now. Laura had seen the killing, had seen the android murdered too. Perhaps it had happened in our house, our backyard. No wonder Armistead had her put away for safe keeping — it was a miracle he hadn't just killed her. That also explained why I was being hunted — to get me out of the way, to keep me from reaching her and exposing the truth.

"Now you see?" the android asked.

"I see," I said. "If we can get Laura out, it'll clear your brother's name. It'll —"

"Stop talking," he said. "It's time for action."

We were practically at the back of the sprawling supermarket build-

ing now. We stood at the first-floor window for a second, and I looked back at Huntley.

"Well?"

"Smash the window and go in," Huntley said. "I'll take care of the alarm. There's nothing to worry about."

"I don't understand," I said. "How —"

"Go on!"

I grabbed a stone and smashed in the window. The bells began to ring. And then I saw how the android George Huntley had been planning to take care of the alarm.

**H**E GAVE ME A SHOVE that knocked me halfway through the window. I turned and saw him starting to run. For a second I felt betrayed — and then horrified.

He was running toward the front of the building, straight toward the crowd of android-killers standing out there. And he was shouting, "Come get me! Catch me if you can!"

He had deliberately sacrificed himself! I heard them yelling, heard the sound of footsteps as they started to pursue him, ignoring the alarm.

I had no further time to waste. I leaped over the sill, found the alarm switch, threw it. The supermarket became still.

I began to pick my way through the darkened storeroom, through

the heaps of baskets and crates, toward Armistead's office. I was confident that I would find Armistead there.

I did.

He was sitting with his back to the door, talking on the phone.

"What's that? Crazy android ran right past the store and they're all chasing him? I was wondering about that. The alarm bell just went off here, and it must have been the same guy. Musta broke a window in back first."

He kept on talking. I stopped listening. I was looking at Laura.

She sat tied up in one corner of the room, her eyes wide with astonishment at the sight of me. She seemed to be in pretty good shape. Her blouse was torn, her skirt was slashed to the thigh, and I could see bruises and scratches that made me wince. But they hadn't hurt her. That was all that mattered. Home, books, furniture — as long as they hadn't hurt Laura, what did the other things matter?

"Hello, Armistead," I said. I stepped inside and slammed the door. "I came to pay you a little visit."

He whirled, threw down the phone, and came toward me all in the same motion. He was a thick-bodied, ugly man, and there was strength in his arms and legs. He charged. I waited for him, and hit him in the face. Blood trickled out

over his split lip, making him look even uglier.

"*Goddam android!*" he muttered.

I laughed. "You're starting to believe your own lies, Armistead. And that's bad." I hit him again. His eyes blazed, and he struck out at me wildly. He was strong, but he wasn't used to fighting. He was a talker. He let other people do his fighting for him.

For a minute I felt that I really *was* an android — or, at least, that I was fighting for all the synthetic men who had died since the first one had left the laboratory three centuries ago. My fists ploughed into Armistead's belly, and he rocked on his feet. His eyes started to look glassy.

He got in one more punch, a solid one that closed my already-battered eye. And then I moved in on him.

"That's for Centaurus," I said, and hit him. "That's for Rigel. That's for Procyon." I went on, naming all the places where there had been anti-android rioting. By the time I was finished, Armistead lay in a huddled, sobbing heap on the floor.

I untied Laura, kissed her, and trussed Armistead up against the

chair.

"It's good to see you, honey," I told her.

"I thought you'd never come back," she said.

I turned to Armistead and snapped on the portable tape-recorder on his desk. "Okay, Armistead. I want a full confession of the way you provoked this riot. Begin with the way you had Mary Cartwright killed, and keep moving from there." I hit him again, just by way of loosening his tongue.

From somewhere in the front of the supermarket, I heard someone yell, "Hey, Armistead! We got another!"

The "other" must have been Huntley! I clamped my lips together. Armistead was beginning to speak, slowly, unwillingly. The whole dirty story was going down on tape.

Any minute, the townspeople would be in here to report the happy news to Armistead. But I was going to have a full confession by that time, and I was going to make them listen to every bit of it. I was going to make sure that George Huntley's sacrifice hadn't been in vain.

Nor all the rest like him.

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# DEATHTRAP PLANET

*By*

*Randall Garrett*

**I**DIDN'T FIND OUT until later why the natives were chasing me through the flatlands of Dabyra. They were out to kill — and how was I supposed to know that Mark Hallert of Interstellar Corporation had carefully assigned me to geologize the holiest sanctuary on all Dabyra, the Graveyard

of the Elders?

Hallert had known the score. He knew I'd be found, pursued, probably killed. That was what he — and the Corporation behind him — wanted. But I didn't understand any of this as I ran for my life over the hard purple ground.

I heard shouts behind me. A





**The darndest accidents kept happening to me; if I'd had half a brain I'd have known it was all part of a careful plot—for murder! . . .**

native *assegai* whistled past my left shoulder and stuck quivering in the ground. It had to be thrown hard to stick in that kind of ground. Without breaking my stride I wrenched it up and kept running. I didn't have any weapon more powerful than a pickaxe and I'd left that behind when the Dabyrans attacked me.

The tip of the spear was coated with glossy red beads of some substance that was probably poi-

son. The Dabyrans meant it when they set out to kill a man.

I swivelled my head and looked. There were eight of them behind me. Heavysset, almost neckless, their faces were dark with anger and their green, corrugated skins reminded me unpleasantly of Ter-ran crocodiles. Vicious. I wondered what I'd done to get them so sore at me.

A rising hummock of land loomed in front. I darted to the left,

hunkered down behind it and let the dents go streaming past. They were fierce, but they weren't too bright.

Six went by—and I watched them streak off into the distance, brandishing their spears. The seventh was a little smarter. He stopped and peeked around the little outcropping.

There I was. There he was. He raised his spear for the thrust but mine was already raised. I plunged my weapon deep into his leathery throat. He folded like an accordion and crumpled, looking angry and astonished.

Just one more. He was prowling around the other side of the hill, looking for me. I came over the top of the hill, called to him, and when he looked up I plunged it through him. Chalk off two natives.

There was no sign of the six others. I figured they were somewhere off toward the horizon by now, tracking me like mad. I moved a few feet away from the bodies, unhitched my walk-talk, and called Home Base in the Terran colony 10 miles up ahead.

**HALLERT ANSWERED.** He said, "Corporation Headquarters. Who's this please?"

"Cliff Dane," I said.

"Dane!"

"Had some trouble out here,

Mr. Hallert. I was out examining the site you assigned me when eight natives came out of nowhere and started to chase me. I had to leg it for half a mile or more. I dodged six of them but the last two were a little smarter. So I had to kill them."

Silence for just a split-second. Then: "You *killed* two natives, Dane?"

"Self-defense. What did you want me to do? Stand here and die the noble death of a Martyr?"

"No sarcasm, Dane. This is a terribly serious matter and it's going to have all sorts of repercussions. We may have to dismiss you to pacify the native chieftains —"

I felt myself get red under my collar. "Look here, Hallert. I just risked my life for your damned Corporation. I just ran half a mile and speared two natives because you assured me this area was perfectly safe to prospect. And now you say I'm going to get fired on top of that?"

His voice was icy. "I'll make all decisions and do what's right, in the name of the Corporation. Please report back here at once. I'll do whatever needs to be done."

*Click!*

Dead went the contact. I scowled at the useless phones for a second, then stuck them in my pack.

Damn Hallert, I thought. Damn

this planet and damn the vicious bloodsucking Corporation I work for. I cursed everything and everyone in as detailed a manner as I could manage.

After a while I calmed down. I looked around for any sign of the furious Dabyrans but they were over the hill and long out of sight. I debated going back to my digging-site to get my tools, decided against it — the Corporation had plenty more pickaxes — and started the long trek back to town.

It was a hell of a note, I thought.

But I couldn't expect anything more courteous from the Corporation. Interstellar Corporation was a hydra-headed affair that sprawled out over 50 worlds and 80 inhabited satellites. Its multi-trillion credit organization hadn't been erected on any foundation of faith, hope, or charity. There was nothing soft about the Corporation or any of its managers.

As I walked, an ugly suspicion sprouted in my mind — a suspicion that later proved all too true.

*Suppose, I asked myself, Hallert deliberately sent me out here to die? Suppose the Corporation had found out about me and had alerted Hallert to get rid of me?*

It was quite possible. And if the Corporation knew what I was trying to do, my life wouldn't be worth a plugged half-credit slug

on Dabyra or any other world in this sector of the galaxy.

I HAD BEEN in Corporation pay for more than a year before I discovered some things I didn't like about their business practices.

As a geologist I knew I was dependent on the Corporation for a job. There was no other way. They controlled geological exploration on the outworlds and their monopoly was guaranteed by the Interplanetary Confederation that governs the galaxy. So when I finished my training I signed the usual Corporation contract and was shipped out to Siholla, a planet in the Nisharpha chain. I did some pretty good work for the Corporation there and when my year was up I learned I was getting a two-week vacation on Earth, a bonus, and an assignment to another planet.

But when I came back to Earth I stopped off in Rio di Janeiro to talk to a man I knew in the Confederation government.

He was Jerry Chapman, with whom I went to school; now he was an undersecretary in charge of colonial affairs, working his way up slowly in the Government.

I said to him, "I've just come back from Nisharpa. I served a term as Corporation geologist on the planet Siholla. Know the

world?"

"Small, Earth-type, humanoid aliens. Sure."

"I've got reason to suspect that the Corporation is fleecing those ailians. It's supposed to be paying them a fee for use of their lands but I suspect that some tricky bookkeeping is being used to squeeze that fee right back from them — hidden taxes, security charges, things like that."

Jerry shrugged. "This isn't news. We've known for years that the Corporation doesn't play it straight. If we could only get some dope on them we'd slap them with a fine so stiff you could support five solar systems for a year on it. But we can't prove anything — and they've got good lawyers."

I knew what he meant. No one — not even the Government — could go around making false charges. It cost too much to lose when you dragged the Corporation into court.

I took a deep breath and said, "I'm a Corporation man, but I don't like the Corporation much. I'd like to have enough cash to go out on my own and do independent research on the uncharted worlds — but I can't afford that. What would it be worth to the Government if I dug up some evidence that would put the Interstellar Corporation behind the eighthball?"

He looked at me thoughtfully for a long moment before saying anything. I heard his teeth crunch down hard on the stylus he was nibbling. Finally he said, "You'll be taking a long chance, Cliff. We can't officially employ you as a spy — that's out of the question. You'd have to be totally on your own. And the Corporation's a big thing to risk bucking."

"I'll chance it. What's it worth to me?"

"Turn in the stuff we're looking for and I'll see you get enough cash to finance a dozen lifetimes of geological research. But we can't help you at all, Cliff. Our hands are tied by silly things like ethics."

"Ethics don't trouble the Corporation any," I said. "I won't let them trouble me."

I LEFT ON MY NEW ASSIGNMENT the following Monday, heading for Dabyra in the Monolu system. My mistake was not realizing that the Corporation has more heads than one. They probably kept tabs on any vacationing employees on Earth, trailed them, watched them closely. Any Corporation man who stopped off in Rio di Janeiro to talk to a Government official was definitely followed. Maybe they had some way of discovering the essence of my conversation with Jerry Chapman.

Maybe they figured that anyone who had any dealings at all with the Government was potentially dangerous to the Corporation and ought to be eradicated before he could do any real damage.

I didn't think of any of these things. Innocence, I guess. So when the cargo winch "snapped" and 10 tons of heavy machinery bound for the Deneb system came thundering down out of nowhere at the spaceport, I marked it off as an accident.

Some accident. Those machines made a three-foot dent in the ferroconcrete, six inches from where I stood. I told myself it was a lucky break and I bought myself an extra drink in the spaceport bar before blastoff. Luck? Hell, it was a miscalculation on the Corporation's part and probably some poor idiot lost a month's pay because his aim was six inches off.

There was another "accident" six days out in space. The compartment of the liner I was in suddenly was evacuated of air without warning, without signal. *Whoosh!* and out it went. The sudden depressurizing killed four of my fellow passengers.

Only this time I had an accident working on my side. I was curious about the spacesuits that stood racked for emergency use along the sides of the cabin; I just happened to be investigating them

when the air vanished. I had a pressure-helmet on. It was a lucky break and it saved my life. Everyone congratulated me on my good fortune.

But I should have seen right then that the Corporation was trying to murder me.

Instead I landed on Dabyra, right on schedule. The captain of the liner congratulated me on my good luck. I hoisted my gear, left ship, and went down to report to the local Corporation headquarters.

The heavyset man back of the desk looked at me sharply and said, "I'm Mark Hallert. Are you Cliff Dane?"

"That's right."

"Been waiting for you. There's plenty of work to be done on this world and the home office says you're a good man."

He outlined my work-area: a flatland 10 miles from town where he thought the possibilities of radioactives might be high; he also wanted me to take some soil samples, poke around, and in general dig the place up. I went. I dug. I was chased. I killed two Dabyrans, strictly in self-defense.

Now I was on my way back to town. But my mind was finally operating on all cylinders and I wasn't going to stick my nose into Mark Hallert's office until I knew exactly what I was up against.

MY FIRST STOP in town was the Paradise Bar in the Earth Quarter. I broke the photoelectrics and stepped inside carefully. A couple of Corporation workers were there sipping drinks, but I ignored them.

I found the man I wanted. He was sitting at the far end of the bar, half-hidden by the smoky darkness down there. He was slouched dreamily over a glass of *cahtnolla*. I dumped my knapsack out of the way and slid into the seat next to him.

His glass was nearly empty. I tapped it with my fingernail and said, "Interested in another one of those on me, friend?"

"Maybe. Who are you?"

One half-closed eye brightened.

"Cliff Dane. I'm a geologist for the Corporation. I'm new on Dabyra. But I'd like to talk to you a bit, Mr. Webber."

Mat Webber had been a member of the Exploration Team that first opened up Dabyra 35 years before. He had been pointed out to me at the spaceport when I'd landed here; I was pretty sure he could give me the information I needed:

"Talk away," Webber said. "Drinks first."

I ordered two *cahtnollas* and when they came I said, "You don't like the Corporation much, do you?"

"Who the hell told you that?"

I touched his arm gently. "I think the Corporation's trying to murder me," I said. "I don't like 'em too much myself. I think you can help me."

His eyes glistened with a new brightness. "Maybe yes, maybe no." He sipped the drink. "Keep talking."

"I'm pretty new on Dabyra. Hallert of the Corporation sent me out on my first exploration mission today — perfectly innocent plot of land. I did some routine digging, looked around, took some soil samples. Then eight Dabyrans waving poison spears came out of nowhere and chased me. They almost killed me."

He wheeled around to look at me. I met his gaze squarely, looked into the old, faded eyes. "Whereabouts were you digging?" he asked.

"Ten miles from here, down the dirt road and off to the left. The ground was flat and hard, as if someone had packed it down."

His eyes widened. "You mean to say Hallert sent you there cold, without telling you where you were going?"

This was what I wanted. I said, "No. He didn't say a word."

"Uh-huh. Then that means the Corporation's out to finish you off, son. Because the place Hallert sent you to is known as the Graveyard of the Elders. It's a

sanctuary. A burying place. It's the holiest damned place on all Dabyra and it don't surprise me a bit to hear that the natives got sore when you started to dig it up."

I DIGESTED THAT particular information and said, "Old-timer, that's worth another drink to me. Graveyard, huh?"

The drinks came. Webber said, "You better drink yours up fast, boy. If the Corporation gets after you, you don't stay alive long."

"You did."

"Corporation didn't want to kill me. Just wanted to ruin me, and they did. Took away all my mineral claims on this planet and wasn't a thing I could do. Left me penniless, after I found the damn place for them. But that's the way the Corporation works."

I nodded. "I know. I mean to do something about it, too."

Webber shrugged and drained off his drink. "I wish you luck. But you better do it fast, before they get you."

A tall blonde entered the bar. She wore a tight halter and shorts that were almost translucent and she looked all breasts and hips. Every eye in the place looked around and planted itself on her as she came in.

I looked at Webber. "Who's she? I saw her around Corpora-

tion Hq when I met Hallert."

"Her name's Joan Martin. She's Hallert's playmate, you might say. Corporation doesn't like its branch managers to be married but it likes them to have female acquaintances."

"Oh."

I heard Joan Martin say, "Two thiellin martinis, and make them to go out. The Chief's thirsty."

"Right away, Miss Martin," the bartender said. He started to mix the drinks.

The girl turned away from the bar and quite casually gave every male in the place the eye, beginning near the door and ending up down in the back, with me. She eyed me long and hard, and I stared back levelly, not at all displeased at what I saw. It was unusual to find such a lovely girl on a frontier planet. Pale thighs, firm breasts . . . I could bet she'd been imported by the Corporation specially for Hallert's amusement. She wasn't the pioneer type. Behind her loveliness there was a cold, hard, citified glitter that made her look strangely harsh and ugly on close inspection.

She got through looking at me and said to the bartender, "Hold those drinks a sec. I want to make a call."

She stalked across the room to the visiphone. Shielding the visiphone screen, she made a call. I

couldn't hear a word of what she was saying but I could guess.

I looked at old Webber. "She's fingering me for Hallert. I guess they got tired of trying subtle ways of killing me and now they're going to come right out and do it. Parden me while I fade away into the background."

I STEPPED BACK into the shadows deep in the far end of the bar and watched as the girl took her two drinks and began to leave the bar. It was all rehearsed very well, I thought. She just about reached the door when relays clicked, the photoelectrics flung the door inward and open, and three tough-looking men in the uniform of the Corporation Special Police stepped into the bar.

I was wiser, now. I knew what the picture was.

I said to Webber, speaking in a rough whisper, "They're going to look around for me. Start a fuss when they do."

The guard in the lead said, "Everyone stay right where you are. Mr. Hallert has discovered that an anti-Corporation spy is loose on Dabyra and that he's right here in this bar. We mean to bring this traitor to justice."

The three guards began to move into the bar, looking at faces. Suddenly I picked up a table and heaved it into the middle of the

floor. Glasses went spraying explosively in all directions.

Then old Webber yelled, "Live it up, boys! Let's have a little confusion!"

And a riot started.

Within seconds the three guards were surrounded by 20 or 30 more-or-less sober Earthmen, milling, shouting, yelling, generally carrying on. I took careful aim and bashed out the fluorescent tube overhead with a well-thrown bottle. In the darkness, it was hard to tell who was which, or why. I heard the guards yelling threats but I was counting on the fact that they wouldn't shoot up a bunch of civilians.

I put my head down and started to move out of the shadows.

It wasn't easy to bull my way into that throng of milling madmen but I made it. I found myself jammed up against one of the guards. His gray-and-red uniform was rumpled and dishevelled, and he was cursing and trying to get his blaster out of its holster. But Webber and some other man were pinned up flat against him. He couldn't get the weapon free.

I slugged him. Teeth crunched and he sagged down.

"Okay," I said to Webber. "Stop hemming him in."

They stepped aside and I dragged the unconscious guard into a corner while the riot went on a-



round us. I didn't want the fellow to get trampled to death so I coolly abstracted his blaster and shoved him under a table.

Then, armed, I fisted my way through the riot and out into the street. There was a calm about the bright day that made the wild scene in the darkened bar seem curiously unreal.

I spotted the girl up ahead. "Miss Martin!" I yelled. "Wait for me!"

She was perhaps a hundred feet ahead of me and she held the two drinks, one in each hand. She turned to see who was calling her and gasped when she saw it was me — the renegade she had just turned in.

But by then I had the blaster out and it was pointing square at her pretty middle. I said, "Just stay right there until I catch up with you. The range of this thing is pretty good. I'll carve a hole where your ribs ought to be if you move a muscle."

She waited.

**I** JOGGED UP to her, keeping the blaster out. There was a look of cool hatred on her face when I got close enough to see expressions.

She said, "What do you mean by pulling a gun on me? The Corporation. . ."

"The Corporation is busy try-

ing to murder me," I said. "I don't approve of the idea." I nudged her bare stomach with my blaster. "Come on with me. Over to my hotel."

"What? If you think. . ."

"Believe me, lady, I have no designs on your alleged honor. I'm after bigger game than a Corporation tart." She whitened, then went red. I said, "Let's go. I don't have much time."

I shepherded her across the wide, empty street and up into my hotel room. I had her put the two drinks down on my table. "Okay," I said. "Strip. And do it without any fancy tricks. I want to be able to see your hands at all times."

She was looking neutron-beams at me. "This is an outrage! I'll have you flogged! I'll . . ."

"If I have to do the job myself, I won't be gentle. Come on. You probably have a whole artillery concealed in that skimpy outfit and I don't trust you with it."

I saw the veneer of hardness start to crack. She was angry but she was also plenty scared. I kept the gun trained squarely on her while she peeled out of her halter and shorts and stood defiantly nude in the middle of the floor.

She had an admirable body but I had more urgent things on my mind. I hardly even bothered to look at her. I went through her clothes and found a sweet and

deadly little needle-gun maybe two inches long clipped to the inside of her shorts, where it would lie nice and flat along her left thigh until the time came for her to drill a hole in me.

I removed the weapon, searched the rest of her outfit, and tossed the clothes back to her. "Okay, sweetheart. Your fangs have been pulled."

She got dressed. I didn't turn my back. When she was decent again she said, "What's the idea behind all this?"

"Your boyfriend Hallert sent me out on a deathtrap mission today," I said. "He sent me to dig up the Graveyard of the Elders and if I hadn't been a track man in college I'd be busy fossilizing out there now. On the way out here from Earth, someone accidentally let all the air out of my compartment in the ship. And at the spaceport before I left Earth they dropped 10 tons of cargo six inches from where I stood."

"How quaint. So?"

"The Corporation, milady, has discovered that I mean it no good. This is correct. The Corporation is therefore determined to kill me. I intend to extract certain records from Hallert before they get me and you're going to help me get them."

"Me?"

"I want you to tell me a few

things about the layout of Hallert's office."

"And if I don't?"

"You're not essential to this plan, girly. If you choose not to talk — well, I can be just as tough and mean as the Corporation can." I hefted her little needler. "This can kill a person. But it doesn't have to. On low beam it could make a hell of a mess of your face."

THE CORPORATION, as an abstract entity, was the toughest thing in the galaxy — tougher, maybe, than the Confederation Government itself. The Corporation, as an abstract entity, was a rough customer.

But the trouble was abstract entities don't really exist. Actually the Corporation was just a chain of guys named Hallert, linked together by that idea, *Corporation*.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

I didn't know how strong Hallert was. But the place to attack the Corporation was on the personal level, I knew. I couldn't fight the whole Corporation — but maybe I could break down Hallert. It all depended on just how tough *he* was, personally, without the backing of the Corporation.

So I hung concealed in the closet of Hallert's bedroom, up above the Corporation headquarters, list-

ening to Joan Martin talking to him — a Joan Martin who was well aware that the first time she said anything I didn't like she was going to get needled.

I listened to them for a while. Joan had smuggled me in here, cursing me bitterly all the while, and then had called Hallert up on the housephone while I waited in the closet. The closets had little transoms, up at the top, which helped to ventilate things and which also made lovely spy-posts. I peered out a quarter-inch opening at the top of the transom, and listened.

At my orders she was trying to get him to reveal the combination of the main safe. She wasn't doing a very good job of it and he was getting more and more suspicious. Until he said, "Joan, stop bothering me! What possible use would you have for the combination? You know the Corporation would have my head if —"

I slid the transom open. "Okay, Hallert. Just stand right where you are, and don't move. Don't even twitch."

He looked up at me and saw my grinning face. "Dane! What are you. . .?"

"Never mind that. Joan, get over against that wall — and you, Hallert, stand over there." I punctuated my orders with waggles of the blaster I held in my right hand.

I held the needler in my left hand. I wasn't taking any chances.

I kicked the closet door open and came out. Hallert was pale fishbelly white. I said, "I'd like to have the combination of the Corporation safe. I want to get a peek at your confidential records." — "I can't give you the combination," he said hoarsely. "If you're that interested, blast the safe open."

I shook my head. "I know those safes. First attempt at cracking them and everything inside gets demolecularized. The Corporation's too clever not to use crackproof safes. I want the combination. From you."

Sweat beaded his fleshy face. He knew what that safe contained. He knew the Corporation was cooked if he yielded. "No," he said.

"No?" I grinned coldly. "Okay. I'm going to start carving up Miss Martin with this needlegun. Any time you want me to stop, begin spouting the right numbers."

"Mark! No! Give him the combination!" she cried.

He set his jaw and shook his head. I didn't want to do what I was going to do. I made sure the the needler was at lowest power and flicked on the stud for an instant. A thin brown line appeared along the fleshy part of Joan Martin's thighs, right below where

her shorts ended. She screamed.

"Well, Hallert? I'm using the Corporation's own methods, now — and I hate them."

"I'm not talking."

I gave her another squirt with the needler and the heat beam seared its way across her arm. "The next blast goes across her breasts," I said. I was praying he wouldn't make me do it.

He didn't.

He jumped at me, instead. The clever bastard knew I'd lose everything if I killed him — so he was putting his life on the line to call my bluff. I was taken a little by surprise. His fists sent me crashing back and he nearly ripped the blaster from my hand. I recovered, caught my balance, slashed him across the face with the snout of the blaster. Blood spouted. I hit him again, and then nipped him with the needler across the knees. He sagged. I hit him three or four times quickly, not too hard, and he fell over, staring up at me dully.

"Nice try, but it didn't work," I said. He shook his head dizzily. He was all shaken up. The girl hadn't moved.

I was down to my last trump card. If it didn't work I was going to have to admit the Corporation was unbeatable. I said, "I'm not going to torture your girl friend any more. It doesn't seem to both-

er you and it makes me feel filthy all over." I caught her sigh of relief.

I went on, "Instead, Hallert, I'm going to put it to you on an all-or-nothing basis. If you don't give me the combination, I'm going to kill you. Honestly. If you *do* give me the combination, the Corporation will kill you, won't it?" He nodded. "Okay," I said. "You're a dead man either way. For once in your life do something decent. Let me have the combination. Let me get the data that'll incriminate the Corporation. It'll take something off your soul and you'll still have a fair chance of staying alive, if you can talk fast enough or run fast enough when the Corporation comes after you. If you don't hand over the combination I'll sure enough kill you right on the spot. You can start making up your mind now."

He was silent a long time. I saw expressions coming over his pudgy face as he debated with himself. Finally he said, wheezing, "Okay, Dane. What you say makes sense. I'll hand over the combination to you . . . you bastard."

That was it.

THE REST was simple. I got the data; I got off Dabyra in one piece and somehow I survived the trip back to Earth. I turned over my data to Jerry Chapman and

the big assault on the Corporation began. The trial made history.

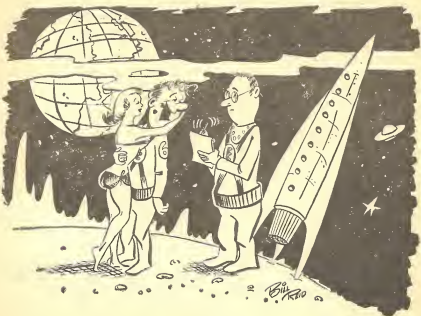
I'll bet the Corporation people would like to find me now but they won't. I'm out here in Andromeda, a million lightyears from Corporation territory, and I won't be coming back to Earth for 15 or 20 years. . . not till my geological survey is done.

But if I stay out here a thousand years I'll never forget the way Joan Martin looked at me after I wrenched the combination out of her pal. She must have

been thinking about the scars that would mar her beauty forever. She said, "Why couldn't you have done that first — instead of cutting me up? You didn't have to do it."

I said to her, "In order to beat a filthy thing you have to be even filthier yourself. The whole Confederation Government couldn't beat the Corporation, because they were playing it clean. *I* beat them. The dirty way."

It sounded good. But I'll never forget the hate in her face, or the scars across her lovely thighs.



"She said . . . nichorbinboral . . . which I presume means yes!"

# Get Off My Planet!

*By*

*Tom W. Harris*

**It was a peaceful looking little world,  
and its inhabitants, the gurries, were docile  
and cute. Still, a man could go insane there!**

**"I**T DOESN'T LOOK like a killer planet," said Kronski, the Tech Life.

"You've read the reports," countered Holton, the Tech Matter. "Yet it does seem like a lovely planet."

West, the grey-haired Dig, was slower to comment, and then he echoed Holton. "Yes, it seems to be a very lovely planet."

They stood in the ship's open airlock looking out at it. The rolling land was green and very evenly furred with a close, small grass. The trees were feathery and white, like ivory trees in a carved miniature from China, but they were tall, and they were very striking against the green. There was only one sun, a tea rose yellow.

They took deep gulps of air like rhinish wine, like maywine delicately musked and scented. It was like listening to music, to breathe this air.

"It's a revised and edited Earth," said the Dig. "Earth with technicolor...look at those violet clouds against the yellow. Like Earth in a dream you might have, of going home, after you'd been out a long time. What say, Tech Matter?"

"The air is a little higher on oxygen and lower on nitrogen, that's why it's light in the lungs," said Holton. "Gravity's point eight seven — put a bounce in the old walk. A swell planet!"

"Perhaps the others were psychotic before they got here," speculated Kronski. "Do you see anything that looks like a gurry?"

"I'm wondering if we'll find that one guy," said Holton.

"Time will tell," said West. "Let's get on with it."

They got on with it. They set up the shelter just outside the fused blast-circle of the ship, got their apparatus into it and the things for



living. Kronski and Holton strolled off to begin the Pattern of Investigation, Kronski exploring things organic, Holton the inorganic. West reclined in his folding chair, his two guns uncomfortable on his hips, the spools stacked beside the audiphone. By the time they left he would have talked his report into the spools. He hoped it would be favorable. They needed this planet. It was a fine planet, after so many bad planets.

What could be wrong with it? So far he didn't dig it. He didn't dig it but of course he would eventually. He was perhaps the best

Dig in the service. Not that he was especially proud of that—he had just been born with a knack for insight, appraisal, and the fires, hammer and anvil of his life had tempered the knack just right.

Let's review the background, he thought.

There was precious little to review. The ship of discovery had touched here very briefly, given the report that could be summarized by the reaction of the Dig and his staff—it seemed a lovely planet. And then the pilot colony — three families — had returned after an eleven days' stay mentally disturb-

ed, perhaps even unbalanced, unwilling to talk much. It was a long trip out, and the Service had put it down to "Cabin fever"—psychological tensions on the ship, perhaps a bad matching of personalities.

The second pilot colony had left after 13 days. All but one man. They said he was a suicide.

None of them responded well to questioning, keeping something locked furtively away with a stubbornness which had, one felt, some subtle hint of shame. There were indications of religious mania, or at least a revived interest in religion, and paranoid hints.

The poor damn human race, the Dig reflected.

Some of them had said something about the gurrries, which seemed to be small, furred animals, but nobody could be pinned down. And there was something about reading minds. But hell, thought West, we've met plenty of telepaths, and not all animals either. He remembered, smiling, the gas bubbles of Venus.

"Sir! Sir!"

It was young Kronski, running, his grey eyes agitated but not scared. "We found him—the one they said killed himself. Holton's staying with the body."

West followed him across the bouncy tight grass fields. The dead man was seated against an ivory tree, his gun in his right hand still

pointed toward himself. The tree sent down a gentle perfume.

Holton spoke. "It's just the way we found him, sir. Lucky he didn't use the other gun, we wouldn't have found anything."

THE DIG QUASHED an impulse of annoyance at the Tech Matter. He regarded the body, walked around it, stood considering. "All the evidence says suicide. Well, nothing we can do about it."

"Do we take him back?" asked Kronski.

"No room in the ship. Bury him here, underneath the tree. Kronski, you'd better do a post, but I don't think you'll find anything. Holton, you come back with me. I have his name — we can put up a marker."

What sort was he, and what brought him here, West asked within his head. To come with hope to a fair place and die of secret poison. You were one of us . . . the poor, damned human race. Pushing their kiddie-kars out among the stars. Mysteries.

"I wonder why he did it," said young Kronski.

"I'll know before we leave," said the Dig. "Come on, Holton."

Just outside the shelter they met the gurry. They knew that was what it was. Holton hissed in his breath and yanked his gun up. West pushed back his arm. They



stood staring at the gurry.

It was harmless enough looking, and they had both seen beings that looked more unusual. Legless, it was pleasantly swaddled in tan fur, and was about the size of a woodchuck. It moved along by wriggling the strip of hide or membrane that hung like a curtain to the ground along the underside of its cylindrical, plump body. The lower edge of this membrane, which must have been stiffened with cartilage, was hairless and looked leathery.

Both rounded ends looked exactly alike, except that in the end they assumed to be the head there was an orifice and a single eye. It turned this eye upon them.

"Don't move," said the Dig. "I don't want it irritated or frightened. I'm going to try to see if it's telepathic."

He thought toward the gurry, keeping the ideas unhusked from words, as he had learned to do. The ideas were of peace and friendship. Then he sent the gurry the idea that, if it understood and was friendly, it should come forward.

It watched them without moving.

"It gives me the creeps," said Holton. "It can see me in a funny way."

"We've been building it up in our minds," said West. "We should keep that from influencing us."

That afternoon more guries appeared. They were neither friendly nor unfriendly. They were passive. They scurried about close to the men, never hampering them, always watching.

That evening Kronski didn't talk much, and Holton seemed grouchy. The Dig had finished speaking his evening's report into the tapes and sat looking at the gurry which sat looking at him. He observed that its single eye was two-pupilled, which must have given it depth-vision, and the coloration of the pupils met taperingly between them.

The conviction had been growing on him that the guries were telepathic in a way not usual. Looking at the gurry, he became convinced of this. Memories and awarenesses he had kept corked up for years were moving in his mind, and it was the gurry causing it.

The guries read minds, all right. Whole minds, not just the thoughts you were thinking at the moment, but the entire buried record, and you could tell what part of the record the gurry was reading.

He looked away from the gurry but it made no difference. He could feel it mutely unfolding the pages. It came to a page he did not want unfolded.

"Get out!" his mind protested, tightening itself.

The gurry went on reading.

It was the story of how the Dig had left his wife. It was the story of an ambition and a passion long since dead, and West groveled while the gurry read it. He had left her without money or a place to go, and with two children. A week later he had returned, grimy with self-loathing, and nobody had ever known of it. Now the gurry was reading it.

It left him shaken as nothing had shaken him in years.

He looked at the others. They had built a fire and were sitting by it, they and the guries. Holton's face was dark and angry, and Kronski was moon-pale.

West knew he and Kronski and Holton were decent men, but there is something, he ruminatèd, in the nature of men that make them refuse to open themselves. More than the right of property or wife or liberty, all men recognize the right of privacy. They recognize it so instinctively, reflected the Dig, that it has never even needed to be put into law or words.

The gurry went on reading. The Dig strolled out of the firelight and began running. Somehow the gurry was able to follow him.

That night he gave the men sleeping tablets, took one himself. He did not awaken rested.

Kronski and Holton went out as usual the next day, and he sat near the shelter underneath the ivory

trees. He tried to ignore the gurry while he did some thinking. His mission was to dig the situation, and decide whether the planet was inhabitable. He must explore all possibilities.

Look, his mind pleaded with the gurry. Leave me alone. Maybe your kind can stand this, but we can't. We come in peace—leave us alone.

**IT DIDN'T WORK.** The gurry went on reading. It was reading the story of his promotion. The service had given him credit for the work done by another man, and he had let them. The other man was a Dig already — it wouldn't hurt him. Everybody does something like that sometime, said his mind to the gurry; but we forget about it.

The gurry kept on reading him all day. Never once did he know how the gurry felt as it scanned the record. He could not tell if it was shocked or amused or whether it approved nor even if it understood. But it *knew*. It *knew*.

In the evening his team returned and made its report: edible plants, no new elements, no apparent intelligent life—a good planet. West looked at them closely. Holton's face seemed permanently flushed, shamed, uneasy, and Kronski had a keyed-up look. Nobody mentioned the guries.

Then Holton said curtly: "Sir,

let's get out. It's no good here." He refused to meet the Dig's eyes.

West turned to Kronski. "How about you, Tech Life? Anything bothering you?"

"I just don't like it here," said Kronski, and his eyes too were shifty. "I want to leave too."

"We'll leave when the investigation is finished," said West snapishly. He was a little disappointed in Kronski. Well, he asked himself, have *you* put this in the report yet? Admitted it in the report yet, if you want to put it that way?

He hadn't.

That night the others slept in the ship with the hatches tight, but he stayed in the shelter. It was his mission to find out by every means whether the planet was habitable, and he stayed where the gurrus could get at him in the shelter.

His gurry watched him with its two-pupiled eye and read him. Get out, his mind kept saying. You filthy vermin get out of here. You intimate, shameful, violating vermin get the hell out of here.

Like unwinding thread from an unwilling spool, like pulling the silk by shameful force from the belly of a spider, the gurry unwound West's memories. It unreeled the time a recruit had shouted at him: "You old phony, you act humble but you're looking for glory in the Service like the rest of us,"

and how he had been silent because there was truth in it, and it unreeled the time so long ago when his father had caught him stealing and the times so intimately shameful he had almost convinced himself they had never happened. His mind groveled and whined and pawed and cried and there was nothing he could do about it. When the gurry came to the good times, the moments of nobility and generosity, the time he had saved a life, the time he had disqualified himself from a job for the good of the service, his mind would tell the gurry: There now. How about that? What do you make of that one? But it didn't help, because he had no way of telling if the gurry knew or cared or judged what it was reading.

By God, said his mind, there's one way of living on this planet—and he snatched the gun from his holster. He had never liked the killing he'd had to do, and unlike some others in the Service he was sincerely behind the law never to kill non-hostiles. But now he snatched the gun from his right-hand holster.

A white thick light leaped from the nozzle and the gurry stood motionless, its tan fur radiant with white frosting — ice crystals — as its temperature snapped to absolute zero. The Dig picked up the stiffened gurry like a little sta-

tue, faced the milky, frozen eye away from him, and went to sleep.

He awoke in the night. Another gurry was reading him. Raising his gun, he noticed the frozen gurry was gone, and this one's fur was wet. It was the same animal. It had thawed.

He used his other gun. The gurry exploded into oily smoke.

His scalp crawled as the smoke broiled, gathered, tightened, and the gurry was back. They could reconstitute themselves!

All right, said his mind. All right.

On Neptune we live under domes, and nothing can get out and nothing can get in. In space we live in nice, tight ships, and not even molecules can get through the cracks.

We're a stubborn race, gurry, and we can live under glass like bugs in a case, we know how to stuff the cracks and lock our doors and live inside the kitchen snug and private. We can live here snug and close and cozy, gurry, because we need this planet, and to hell with you and your nasty nosing.

Sleepy and seething, he hammered on the ship until the men opened up. He could tell they had not been sleeping. An open book lay near Kronski's sack, and Holton had spread cards on the deck in a game of solitaire.

The Dig eyed them forlornly. "Here, too?" he questioned. "They can get in anywhere?"

He needn't have asked. He could feel the gurry reading him.

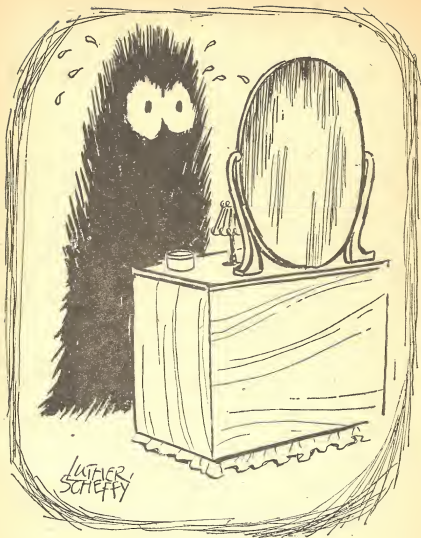
Maybe if we were different, thought West. Maybe if we could face things, or if we could live like...

The idea trailed away. The men were staring at him mutely, and they all knew it was not necessary to stay here any longer. The Dig gave the appropriate orders. They made sure no guries were in the ship anywhere, then battened, set pumps, and the Dig's finger was touching on the blast toggle when he felt Kronski's hand on his shoulder.

"How about that guy?" said Kronski. "You know. Do we leave him?"

West thought it over and told them to go and get him and they went and got him and loaded him aboard, finding room somewhere. It was the only thing to do. West touched down the blast toggle.

In space Kronski and Holton slept, but West stayed awake to talk the rest of his report into the spools. "The planet in question," he began to dictate carefully, "is, for an indefinite period, uninhabitable..."



**Crayshaw's problem was unique; how could he avoid the wiles of women clamoring after a popular actor? There was one way—purchasing—**

## HOUSEMAID 103

by

*Ivar Jorgensen*

**T**HE ONLY MAN in Sollywood who never got mentioned in the scandal sheets was Brad Crayshaw. There wasn't another leading man (or woman) in the sollies who didn't get romantically linked at one time or another, but not Crayshaw.

In a way, that added to his popularity. The moony-eyed teenage girls who went to the sollies for their vicarious necking flocked to the Crayshaw films with the same frequency they did to sollies of such stars as Lee Leighton or Mace Marhew. Experts wondered if the glamour of multiple matrimony might be a myth.

The answer came from Brad Crayshaw himself, in one of his rare press interviews.

"Sure, every kid hopes she can marry Mace Marhew. Why not? Seven females already have, and there's no telling who's next. But

the ones who're looney over me don't stand a chance. I'm a woman-hater, that's all."

Brad Crayshaw's misogyny made clear his appeal to the subdeb set; not only did they want to marry him but in his case they ran the extra-special challenge of having to break down Crayshaw's resistance to feminine charms.

Which was, it seemed, a mighty sturdy resistance.

Brad Crayshaw first skyrocketed to fame in the fall of 2073 when the sollies were given their world premiere simultaneously in New York, Chicago, and Hollywood (which was to have a new name before the following year was out.)

Crayshaw played the part of Paul Bunyan in the sollie of that name. Six feet four, massively built, he was the ideal sollie star; his dimensions merited tridim transmission.

The film played to standees for well over a year and by then Hollywood was Sollywood, Brad Crayshaw was a rich man and the movie industry—the flatties, that is—was a gone bird.

With the coming of sollies a good many of the flattie stars vanished quietly into limbo. Just as the coming of talkie films had finished the careers of such dashing but squeaky-voiced stars as John Gilbert, so did the coming of sollies ruin any flattie actor who depended for his brawn on padding or corsets—and there were some of those. That was out, now—now that the audience could not only see and hear, but feel as well. The film world's heroes and heroines had to be real.

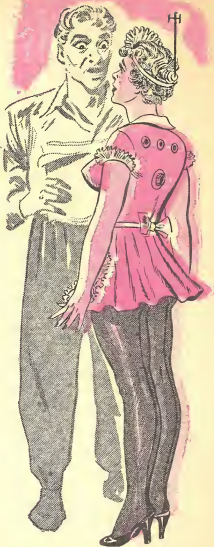
And Brad Crayshaw was real.

But Brad Crayshaw didn't care to join the Sollywood game of musical chairs with mates; he didn't fit in, he didn't jive, he didn't run with the herd.

"I don't get it, Brad," his manager and agent told him. "There isn't a woman in Sollywood who wouldn't trade in a five-year option for a chance to marry you. What goes?"

Crayshaw grinned and poured another shot of gin. "I just don't aim to wed," he said in the familiar bass growl so many women adored.

"I don't like women. I don't like



frills and I don't like lace, and I don't want to be tied down and handed a lot of sentimental slush. Got that, Ace?"

Ace got it. He shrugged. "It's your life, Brad. I won't try to run it—not while my 10 per cent is still in six figures."

"Good. Keep it that way."

Ace kept it that way. Two hours later he had arranged for the celebrated interview in which Brad Crayshaw exposed his misogynistic views to the world and by the following morning every unmarried female in the western hemisphere was anxiously discussing the star's firm statement.

It was criminally unfair, they said, that a man like Brad Crayshaw should abstain from marriage, should remove himself from the matrimonial sweepstakes. He had no right to prefer his hunting and his fishing and the company of his mastiff hound.

There were 10 million red eyes across the country that day—the eyes of girls whose ambition it had been to marry Brad Crayshaw and who saw that ambition forever demolished now.

But there were some who didn't give up that easily.

ONE OF THEM was Lora Laurence, a starlet heading for

the top. After three minor roles in minor sollies she was signed on for a romantic lead opposite Brad Crayshaw in a costume drama called *Across the Wild Frontier*. The role, she knew, would be the beginning of her established stardom but snagging Brad Crayshaw would be the coup that would clinch things.

Crayshaw had no objection to being romantic in front of the multiplex solidoscope cameras; it was just in private life that he grew reticent. He okayed the script even though it was a torrid one for a man of his privately unromantic nature.

So the cameras began to roll and Crayshaw and Laurence swung into their big love scene.

"Darling," Crayshaw said. "I'm leaving, now. My regiment's going to Illinois to fight the Indians."

"Oh—David! You'll come back, won't you?"

"I hope so. Maybe not." Bluntly, matter-of-factly, in the Crayshaw style.

"David—darling! I love you so much! I've never told you, but—"

She moved up against him, caressing him, running her fingers over his Revolutionary War costume, murmuring incoherent little words of love, while the battery of cameras snagged the scene from all



directions and the cybernets picked up various tactile and olfactory sensations which would later be fed directly into the watching audience.

Finally he tore himself away. "I must go now, darling!"

"Darling — you said *darling!*" Lora moaned.

"I must go now!" And he strode stiffly away.

"*Cut!*" the director yelled.

Between takes Crayshaw sipped a drink speculatively and mopped away sweat. It was funny, he thought; he had read the script and thought he had judged it correctly: a crudely-written potboiler, nothing more. And yet it had seemed to come oddly to life just that minute . . .

He frowned suspiciously. And a moment later Lora Laurence drew near.

"Brad - -"

"Yes, Miss Laurence?"

"Call me Lora, will you? I wanted to tell you—I thought your acting was wonderful just now—I mean . . ."

"Thank you, Miss Lau—Lora. You seemed particularly good yourself out there. Well, I guess we oughta get into costume for the next scene . . ."

"No—Brad. There's something I want to tell you."

"Well?"

She clung to him suddenly. "I meant what I was saying, on the set. I mean, it wasn't just lines in a sollie. You understand, Brad? Do you? Do you?"

"Yes," he said icily. "I'm afraid I do."

That night Brad Crayshaw's name appeared for the first and last time in the Sollywood gossip sheets. "*Crayshaw to wed Lora Laurence,*" the headlines yelled.

The following day Crayshaw issued a denial: a flat *no*. It wasn't so. He had no plans for marrying Miss Laurence and furthermore he was going on an extended hunting trip beginning tomorrow and Director Hal Martin could do whatever he wanted with *Across the Wild Frontier* because he wasn't going to appear in it.

They talked him out of breaking his contract and he went through with the film but when it appeared Lora Laurence wasn't in it. Crayshaw had insisted on her being replaced as the price of his continuing.

No one tried to turn a sollie scene into a real-life wooing of Brad Crayshaw after that. For a while it seemed as if his wish to have nothing to do with the female sex was going to be respected.

Then one day a new house-

keeper arrived at the 28-room Crayshaw villa.

Mrs. Stubbs, his old housekeeper, had been the one woman Crayshaw tolerated on the premises—but since she was 63, a grandmother seven times and not especially well preserved for her years, Crayshaw didn't mind. Besides, she was untalkative and kept well out of his way.

"I'm a friend of Mrs. Stubbs," the new housekeeper said. "I'm Mrs. Higgins. Mrs. Stubbs is sick and asked me to fill in for her for a few days."

"Oh. Too bad. Sorry to hear that," Crayshaw grunted. The new housekeeper looked even older and more shrunken than Mrs. Stubbs had so he shrugged and went on cleaning his rifle.

Mrs. Higgins began to move through the room, dusting and wiping, and Crayshaw ignored her as he had ignored Mrs. Stubbs. One housekeeper was just as good as another, he thought.

An hour later a soft voice said, "May I come in?"

There was a girl standing at the door, smiling invitingly.

"Who the blazes are you?" Crayshaw demanded. "How'd you get in here? Mrs. Higgins! Mrs. Higgins!"

"Don't call for her, Brad honey.

She's right here."

"You—you—"

"They can do wonders with makeup, Brad. My name is Jodi Carpenter, and I've seen all your pictures. I'm *wild* about you, Brad! And I know that we'll be happy together, darling."

It was nearly 10 seconds before Crayshaw could find his voice. Finally he sputtered in a high-pitched rasp that bore little resemblance to his usual basso boom, "Get out! *Out!*"

"**I** WANT A ROBOT housemaid," Crayshaw told the salesman. "A mechanical that can dust, mop, cook—you know."

"Of course, sir." The salesman chuckled confidentially. "You want a robot with all the advantages of a female and none of the . . . ah . . . drawbacks. Very well, sir. We have just the model for you."

He drew back a thick plush curtain and revealed a very lifelike female robot, looking much like a tall, slim blonde of 23 or so except for the faint glassiness of her eyes and the minute trademark on her forehead.

"Model 103, Mr. Crayshaw—our very best."

Crayshaw frowned. "Don't you have something that looks—well, a little more like a robot and a little

less like a woman? I'm not interested in a *pretty* robot. I just want one that can empty ashtrays and wash dishes."

The salesman guffawed. "I see what you mean! But I'm sorry about that; we believe in tailoring our products to the demand and this number has proven tremendously popular. I'm afraid there just *is* no robot of the specifications you request. But you'll find this model totally satisfactory."

"Okay. How much?"

"Ah—\$30,000, sir. Ours is a quality product, and . . ."

"I'll take it," Crayshaw said.

The robot did not arrive for nearly a week—a week which Crayshaw spent broodingly doing his own housework and hating it. A tearful Mrs. Stubbs showed up and protested that she hadn't really meant to let that girl take her place that day but she had seemed so anxious to meet him, and . . .

Crayshaw held up one hand for silence. He wasn't interested. He gave Mrs. Stubbs two months' pay and told her to find employment elsewhere.

Finally the robot was installed. Model 103 was perfect, Crayshaw agreed. She—it—handled the task of tidying up the house to perfection, gliding silently from room to room, handling each chore easi-

ly and uncomplainingly. Her designers had left 100 blank memory tubes in her cooking circuits and Crayshaw was able to install 100 of his favorite recipes.

Life was complete, Crayshaw thought. The robot never spoke—he had cut off her highly-developed speech centers for fear of being disturbed while studying scripts—and when her chores were done for the day she turned herself off and stood mutely in the closet until the following morning. No backchat, no nagging, none of the slushy sentimentality to which females are prone and which Crayshaw's masculine soul hated so thoroughly.

Until the disastrous day when Crayshaw tried to rehearse a scene from his forthcoming *Passion and Poverty*.

He summoned Model 103 and told her, "I want you to read the parts in the script that are marked *Lisa*, and wait until I've read the words marked *Paul*. Got that?"

She smiled and nodded. He activated her speech-circuits and they began.

One thing surprised him immediately: she was astonishingly capable. She didn't merely read off word by word, as he had expected; instead, she actually took the part, delivering it with skill. He rose to the lines, embodied

them with passion, found himself emoting with an ardor he had never known in rehearsal before.

When the scene was over he noticed that the robot's glassy eyes were fixed on him strangely.

"Very well done, I must say. We'll have to rehearse again some time."

He reached out to snap off her voice circuits but she caught his hand and said, "Please—not just yet, Mr. Crayshaw."

"Eh?"

"There's something I want to tell you first. Something that's been undergoing feedback within me ever since you bought me, something that finally crystallized just now, when we acted together. I must tell you - -"

"What must you tell me, 103?"

The mechanized mouth drew back in a flawless smile; it seemed as if a light flush colored her soft plastic skin. She sighed lightly.

"I love you, Mr. Crayshaw," the robot said.



## Electronic Brains



**A**UTOMATIC computing machines seem by their very definition to be tremendously complicated affairs. The layman, understanding what they do—add, subtract, multiply, divide, differentiate and integrate—thinks they must be very esoteric devices to be able to perform these mathematical operations. Actually they are not. What makes them complicated of course is that they consist of huge numbers of very simple things.

How do you add electronically? It's as easy as pie. Two resistors in series means simple addition. The total resistance is the sum of the separate resistances. Simple? Of course. Or you can consider the voltages across these series resistors—that's how it's usually done.

Subtraction is equally simple. Consider the voltage across a portion of the resistor.

Multiplication also is easy. Put

your resistances in the arms of a Wheatstone bridge. The proportional relationship that exists between these resistors when the bridge is balanced, gives you either products or quotients depending on what you regard as the inputs.

Differentiation and integration, those fundamental operations of the calculus are even easier. Put a resistor and capacitor in series and apply a voltage. The voltage that appears across the resistor is the derivative of the applied voltage and the voltage that appears across the capacitor is the integral of the applied voltage.

This over-simplification of course does not take into account the inter-connections of these operations nor the switching and coding necessary, but by such analogue procedures almost any desired problem can quickly be solved.

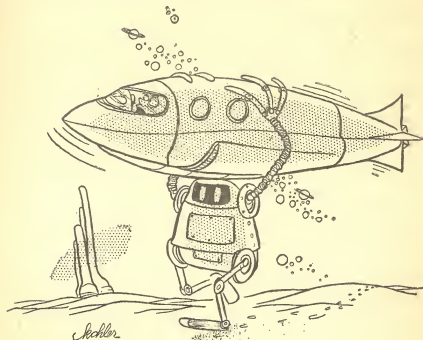
The digital form of these auto-

matic computers, employs even simpler elements—switches which are on and off. These switches may be relays, vacuum tubes, magnetic amplifiers, transistors, or other elements. Their circuitry is complicated but in individual steps it is not.

Confronted with an automatic computer for the first time, a man can be awed, but when he sees what a commonplace reflection of familiar things it is, it can no longer seem mysterious.

Best of all, it suggests very well what the most complicated computer of all is like—the human brain. It too consists of simple elements, the exact equivalent of on-off switches, enormous in number and complicated in interconnection, but not different in basic principle.

And at the bottom of both the electric and human “computing machines” is the omni-present power source, little electric pulses. Be it a neuron or a relay, electronics is both artificial and human.



"I tell you, I've CUT the power!"



**A department for all our readers throughout the world; here you can meet new friends who are interested in the same things you are. Listings are free, so send in yours today!**

#### LITERARY EDITOR

*Ray Nelson:* 212 Columbia Ave., Berkeley, Cal.

Age 25: "I'm single, associate editor of a little literary magazine, *Miscellaneous Man*. I'm interested in writing and illustrating s-f, also commercial art, far-out music—particularly percussion, poetry, modern dance, and travel. Would particularly like to contact fans of the 1949-54 period."

#### AIRCRAFT TECHNICIAN

*Billy J. Smith:* 11204 Love Ave., NE, Albuquerque, New Mex.

Age 25: "I work as an Aircraft Instrument Technician, and am interested in S-F, writing, radio, TV, and collecting s-f and Edgar Rice Burroughs. I have many extra magazines and ERB novels to trade for similar items. Also have an extensive comic book collection, pre-1943."

#### STUDENT

*John P. Stratton:* 20 Burns St., New Haven, Conn.

Age 16: "I'm a prep school student, interested in corresponding with anyone interested in s-f, especially parallel worlds, extraterrestrial life, and ESP. Also, on a more mundane level I enjoy swimming, boating, and chemical experimentation."

#### SOPHOMORE

*David Rolfe:* E3136 11th Ave., Spokane, Wash.

Age 16: "I'm a high school sophomore, interested in almost all branches of science. I collect stamps and enjoy chess. Items of particular interest: flying saucers, psionics, and mathematics. Hope to become a computer technician and part-time writer. Would like to correspond with anyone interested in playing

chess by mail, and will also welcome letters from all other fans."

## EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCHER

*Earl A. Rockwood*: 218 Water St., Clinton, Mass.

Age 31: "I'm an experimental research worker by profession, with hobbies including stamps, science fiction, photography, reading, and corresponding. I will welcome letters from anyone, anyplace."

## SENIOR

*Jim Davis*: 5308 Palo Duro, NE, Albuquerque, New Mex.

Age 17: "I'm a high school senior, interested in reading, writing, archery and swimming. I would like to hear from other teenage fans and also fans in the adult group. I'd especially enjoy hearing from fans in the Hawaiian Islands."

## STUDENT

*John Richards*: 2833 SE 154th Ave., Portland 66, Ore.

Age 15: "I'm interested in writing, acting, illustrating, cryptography, s-f, frontier, and medieval literature. Also like chess. Interested in corresponding with guys and gals my age."

## STUDENT

*Pat LeRoux*: Rt. 133, Box 31, Jean Duluth Rd., Duluth, Minn.

Age 16: "I'm a femme s-f fan, and have been ever since 6th grade. I like rock 'n roll, dancing, swimming, skating, and most other

sports. I'm interested in astronomy and the supernatural. Would like to hear from others with similar interests."

## CLERK

*Dorthie Beard*: 3953 32nd St., San Diego 4, Cal.

Age 21: "I work for a large cleaning firm, with personal interests of telepathy (ESP) reading—s-f, western romances, mystery—dancing, and people. Hope to hear from someone."

## AIRCRAFT WORKER

*Peter R. Bond*: Lockheed Aircraft Corp., Dept. 81-21, Bldg. 66A, Plant A-1, Burbank, Cal.

Age 26: "I'm a price estimator here at Lockheed. I've been an s-f reader for 12 years, ex-sailor, ex-paratrooper. Avidly interested in travel, electronics, and, of course, s-f. I'll answer all letters."

## STUDENT

*James H. Fahey, Jr.*: 753 Braden St., Waynesburg, Pa.

Age 15: "I'm a high school freshman, with interests including football, astronomy, s-f, interplanetary travel, and time travel. Would also like to exchange ideas on flying saucers."

## STUDENT

*Sandra E. Hawkins*: 1233 King St., W., Toronto 3, Ont., Canada.

Age 18: "I'm interested in s-f, hockey, football, stock cars, base-

ball, music—Perry Como, rock 'n roll—and reading—s-f and historical novels. Hope to hear from American fans."

## STUDENT

*Eugene Gulinson*: Koinonia Farm, Americus, Ga.

Age 14: "I'm a student, an s-f fan, with other interests including golf, pool, and cars. Would like to correspond with other guys and gals interested similarly."

## CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST

*E. L. Thompson*: 6603 Middleton St., Huntington Park, Cal.

Age 28: "I'm a psychologist, interested in s-f, reincarnation, with hobbies including Transportation Tokens, model trains, and photography. Will welcome correspondents."

## CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS

*Carl S. Hiatt*: 1005 Grant St., Danville, Ill.

Age 42: "I'm in the construction business, with a love of sports, outdoor life, music and books of historical background. I enjoy s-f and movies of like nature."

## STUDENT

*Bonnie Logan*: 8722-83rd Ave., Edmonton, Alta., Canada.

Age 16: "I'm a high school student, just recently interested in science fiction. I would like to hear from other s-f fans in my age bracket."

## COLLEGE STUDENT

*Nan Mason*: 1038 E. Rock Springs Rd., Atlanta 6, Ga.

Age 19: "I'm a student at Emory University, single, interested in astronomy, stamp collecting, hi-fi, and science fiction. I'd like to correspond with those who have similar interests as well as those who don't. Am also interested in joining an s-f club."

## STUDENT

*Barbara Ann Parker*: 505 Main St., Toronto, Ohio.

Age 17: "I'm a high school student and science fiction fan. Have many hobbies, including tap dancing, oil painting, foreign languages, swimming, and—believe it or not, big game hunting."

## LAB TECHNICIAN

*David Snyder*: 1027 9th St., Apt. 28, Los Alamos, New Mex.

Age 28: "I'm single, and a laboratory technician here at Los Alamos. Besides s-f I enjoy outdoor sports, pop music, auto racing and science. I'll enjoy hearing from anyone."

## ARTIST

*Bob A. Blackburn*: Olmstedville, N. Y.

Age 20: "I'm an artist, with interests including biology, electronics, and psychic phenomena. Like swimming and outdoor camping, which I do a lot of up here in the Adirondacks. Hope to hear from guys and gals similarly inclined."



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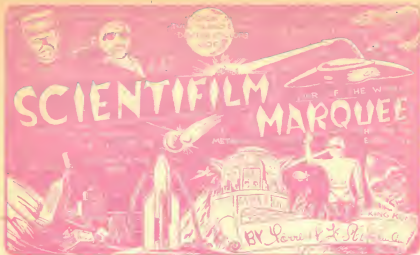
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**R**OBOTS OF THE World, unite! Your metal master, Robby, of *Forbidden Planet* fame, will lead you to victory at the box-office. But beware *The Boy Who Saved the World*, for this young David will be dedicated to destroying you Goliaths. Translated into every-dayese, the preceding message means that MGM plans to perpetuate the life of its \$75,000 robot in a third film, wherein a youngster uncovers an automaton plot to overthrow the world. Latter film will be melodrama as opposed to the humorous treatment of Robby in *The Invisible Boy*.

Speaking of *The Invisible Boy*, producer Nicholas Nayfack has been quoted as saying, "We've surveyed the market and found that more than 50,000,000 copies of science fiction periodicals are sold annually in the USA. We'll level at this market. We found the vulnerable

spot with science fiction addicts in *Forbidden Planet*; they want authenticity and they want quality films. Cost of producing quality s.f. pictures has increased two-fold in the past 3 years. In preparing our new picture we've spent \$40,000 on one prop alone, a giant computer which has 13 miles of wires so that it will be a workable model." According to Nayfack's publicity dept, the producer "has concluded an exploitation arrangement whereby the 96 chapters of the National Science Fiction League will aid in the kickoff campaigns of *The Invisible Boy*."

Atomic power gone berserk is the theme of an original sci-fi yarn by Allen Adler under consideration for production. Its title, *One. Energy* on the loose is also the basis for *X the Unknown*, starring Dean Jagger and completed. In this one a mysterious element bursts from

the bowels of the earth and, a la *The Magnetic Monster* of several seasons ago, ravens around for electrical food.

*Attack from the Future* is a marquee title in search of a shooting script. So far, 3 or 4 Hollywood writers have failed to satisfy the potential producer's particular palate. Might recommend he contact the Science Fiction Agency for assistance: if AE van Vogt, lb Melchior, Sam Merwin, Frank Quattrocchi, Budd Bankson, Gordon Dewey or others of their calibre couldn't meet the demands, it's difficult to imagine who could.

*Report from Space* will be the title of Ray Bradbury's own telefilm series, with 39 stanzas by the master hand.

Wyott Ordnung, one of Hollywood's busiest sripters with 20 sold screenplays under his belt, has belted out 4 sci-fi scenarios, *Satellite in Blood*, *Rogo*, *Terror Below* and *The Nomoglod*. Sunset-Palissades, interested in his *Hell in the Heavens*, has been huddling with the town's busiest monster-maker, Paul Blaisdell. A space-time ship, the planet Earth, the state of Los Angeles (in 2260 AD), an interplanetary alien from the future and other make-ups and mock-ups are among the special visual items required for the ambitious project, which the producer has in mind retitling *300 Years Hence*. This is a script on which I did an additional dialog stint.

Wm Faulkner and Dudley Murphy have penned an original for production by Murphy's own company called *Revolt in the Earth* . . . Pat Murphy is developing her own idea, *The Sonic Man*, into a screen

treatment. . . Frank Quattrocchi story outline, *The Projected Man*, has been purchased by Alex Gordon, and Quattrocchi is busy developing the plot into a script. Action and unusual effects abound.

*The Curse of Frankenstein* in its London opening outgrossed any other movie in the history of the Warner Theater there its opening weekend and continued as a sensational grosser. Usually conservative Punch was opulent in its praise of the production. FRANKENSTEIN FROM SPACE, the first Frankenstein of the future, with monstrous doings in 1956, is a package that's been put together by Budd Bankson and Your Sciencereally, involving the talents of Paul Blaisdell, Burt Shonberg, David Addis, Betty Jo Wells and Martin Varho, with Tam Otteson's Newyorcon hit, "The Little Green Men," tied in for a "rocket 'n' roll" jukebox session in the world of a decade hence. A dozen copies of a 5000 word treatment of FRANKENSTEIN FROM SPACE have just started to circulate in Hollywood at the time this column is rushed to press.

AS BIG AS a battleship, that's the size of the winged creature from outer space that menaces the world for awhile in *The Giant Claw*. Presumably the Brobdingnagian bird needs a titanic wingspread in order to volplane from planet to planet on the ether eddies. Jeff Morrow, whom we're getting used to seeing as a scientist (*This Island Earth*, *Kronos*), is an electronics engineer on duty in the Arctic whose first report of the space-bird is disbelieved. Due

to its enforced fast in space (it's a long time between meals when you're between planets) the Big Bird arrives on earth with the voracious appetite of a dozen Diamond Jim Bradys rolled into one (with King Henry the VIIIth to make it a baker's dozen). No gourmet he, the bird-breast flies about devouring everything edible—and such usually inedible commodities as aeroplanes, buildings, etc. After Washington gets all shook up, a way to pierce the creature's anti-matter shield is discovered and the bird is gotten. Notice I carefully avoided the wording, "and the scientist gets the bird." Only Robert Bloch would stoop to that.

With a title like that, *The Invasion of the Saucer-Men* could hardly be a good picture but—oddly enuf—it is. And in saying so I deny being prejudiced because I sold the original story, "Cosmic Frame" by Paul W. Fairman, to the movies. (I sold his "Deadly City", too, and the hunkajunk that turned out to be—titled *Target Earth!*—stunk on ice.) The tragic short with the snapper ending emerges on the screen as a clever blending of horror and humor. A couple of teenagers get mixed up with 5 saucerians (bulbous - brained green dwarves, probably Martian in origin) who give them a frightening time while the audience has a fine one. The juvenile lead, Steve Terrell, actually is a sci-fi fan, as I have learned from many talks with him on various sets. Blaisdell's little monsters in this one are the best batch yet. The forearm that detaches itself from a dead saucerian and, directed by a monocular orb, pursues its victims till it kills

them by stabs from built-in hypodermic needles, is an ingenious touch. I think this one will be pretty much liked. Not great, you understand, but adequate entertainment. Let us say that it serves its purpose well.

*A Fiend Without A Face* will be the title of the Richard Gordon production to be made in England from Amelia Reynolds Long's story, "The Thought-Monster" . . . *Cat Girl*, shot in England, is about a woman who reverts to the instinctual level of savage felines. . . Shot in England, too, will be Jack Williamson's "Wolves of Darkness". . . Other titles announced for filming include *The Iron Horror*, *The Dead Never Die* (featuring *Vampira*), *The Headless Man*, *The Amazing Colossal Man*, *The Return of the Gargoyles* by Jane Mann, *The Mouse That Roared*, *The Monolith Monster*, *The Monster with a Million Faces*, *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Black Dwarf*, *The Screaming Well*, *The Girl from 2 Million AD* and Frank Robinson's *The Power*.

DANKE SCHOEN DEPT : Thanks and Bon Voyage, Ray Bradbury—happy to hear from you just before sailing for England with the good news that you'll script your own "And the Rock Cried Out" in London for Sir Carol Reed. . . Thanks, Arthur Gardner, for the info that Gramercy's next will be *It Fell from the Flame Barrier*. . . Thanks, James Warren, for selecting me to do the scientifilm feature, MARQUEE DE SADE, for *AFTER HOURS* magazine . . . Thanks, E. Everett Evans, for the phone call informing me "The Circus of Dr. Lao" will be produced in Chicago as a stage spectacular.

A screen version could very well eventuate. . . Thanks, Don Grollman, for a variety of tips. . . Good going, Dick Matheson, to England for the scripting of your great Gold Metal

novel, "I Am Legend" . . . And drop me a senorita from Spain, Ray Harryhausen, while you're building rocs and the Cyclops there for SINBAD. —Forrest J. Ackerman



"One thing is for sure. Whatever it is it ain't big."

Letters

from the  
Readers

BEST HE'S FOUND

Dear Bill Hamling:

I want to congratulate you on two truly great science fiction magazines, TALES and MADGE. I cannot always find them on the newsstands here so guess it's high time I subscribed. I'll take the next twelve issues of each!

My first TALES was the July '56 issue featuring Edmond Hamilton's THUNDER WORLD. It was really a sensational novel! It was one of those great stories you never forget. I can truthfully say it was the best yarn TALES or MADGE has ever published. His WORLD OF NEVER-MEN in the new July issue was also good, but a little short of THUNDER WORLD.

I'd like to summarize it all by saying both your magazines have great stories. And, I get a kick out of your editorials and departments, particularly SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE. Forrest Ackerman does a good job of keeping us up to date on s-f movies.

Keep up the good work.

Charles D. Wilson, Jr.

124 B SW

Miami, Okla.

*Hope you readers in Miami, Okla., won't have any further trouble finding enough copies of TALES and MADGE on your newsstands. Do as Charlie did—subscribe!—You're right about Hamilton, he's good. More of his novels coming up in future issues . . . . . with*

UFO GROUP

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I will get right to the point and extol and virtues and vice-versa of TALES and MADGE at a later time.

A group of UFO (Unidentified Flying Objects) fans, including myself, are now laying the groundwork for the public's answer to the Air Force's "Project Blue Book". It consists of establishing a network of Observer Posts (not only in each state of the U.S. but in foreign countries if possible) to study and analyze the UFO problem. The nucleus of the network will be a State Filter Center, the main Clearing House to be located

here in Milwaukee.

We are sending out an appeal to all UFO fans, particularly those with astronomical equipment and photographic gear. We hope to gather together the largest library of photographic evidence (pro saucer or con) available.

The Air Force project is a red-tape flop as far as we are concerned. The public has been hoodwinked and reliable witnesses to UFO sightings—some of them famous persons—have been ridiculed and falsely quoted. We contend that Air Force information, such as it is, is unreliable, and we intend to gather information by and for public use.

Therefore, representing the Intercontinental Aerial Research Foundation, we will appreciate hearing from any and all UFO fans anxious to prove or disprove the existence of Unidentified Flying Objects, such as flying saucers. We want to achieve our goal of finding out *what* they are and *why* they are present in our skies.

Schedules, Sighting Report forms, registration forms, form letters (for mailing to state O.P. cities and towns by each Filter Center for newspaper publicity) etc., are already being prepared. UFO fans, please contact us at once.

Wallace Jordan

ICARF

1038 N. 21st St

Milwaukee 3, Wisc.

*Good hunting!* . . . . . *wh*

THE MOSTEST, HUH?

Dear Sir:

Your so-called s-f magazine is the worst thing I have ever read. It is dull, boring, repetitious, and

your covers are not a good example of what the story is like inside.

You don't have a single author who is any good.

You don't even have a single interesting ad.

Your magazine, in fact, does not have a single redeeming feature.

I hope I never make the mistake of buying your s-f mistake again.

I would like to see you publish this—unchanged—in your letter section if you dare.

Alice Murphy

3238 13 Mile Rd.

Warren, Mich.

*We dared. Oh yes, we love you too!* . . . . . *wh*

HIS BOY HAMILTON

Dear Bill Hamling:

Ed Hamilton is back in the July issue with a bang! I really liked his new novel, *WORLD OF NEVER-MEN*. The ending was one of the greatest ever, with plenty of excitement inbetween.

It was just enough this time to make the "Old World Wrecker" tops again on my list and the best author ever.

More stories by Hamilton!

James W. Ayers

609 First St.

Attalla, Ala.

*Bet you'll really flip over Ed's novel in this issue, Jim. And there are more coming up!* . . . . . *wh*

HIS BOY SWAIN

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is my first letter to the Editor. I'm 14 and had hardly heard of science fiction two years ago. It was the cover of your September 1955 issue that attracted me and

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I've been reading science fiction ever since.

In my opinion the best stories published in your magazines are written by Dwight V. Swain, though I like most all of the others too.

I particularly like your SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE, cartoons, and letters column.

Frederick Norwood  
 90 Main St.  
 Franklin, La.

Dwight Swain, like Ed Hamilton, is a *TALES* and *MADGE* regular. You can count on many fine upcoming novels from Dwight. Just got a new one in this morning!  
 ..... wth

### TIME TRAVEL BALONEY

Dear Bill:

I've never written a letter to yours or any other s-f magazine, nevertheless I've been a steady reader for the last two and a half years and feel I now have the right

to speak my mind.

In the July issue you published two time travel yarns, *THE RED RASH DEATHS* and *THE ASSASSIN*. In my opinion time travel yarns are a waste of time and money. How can you even try to justify time travel in any conceivable form? Man may travel to the far-flung reaches of the universe, but he can search to doomsday and he'll never accomplish time travel!

James G. Brooks  
 416 W. Pratt St.  
 Baltimore 1, Md.

*The positiveness of your statement would lead us to believe you can back up your belief with some facts. If so, let's have them . . . Let's face it, anything is possible. Improbable, yes, but unquestionably possible. Your view reminds us (historical hearsay) of what people used to say about the possibility of man flying—poppycock, impossible, and so on. Been watching the jets shoot by lately? A few years ago—and just a few at that—people by and large looked on space travel as just a science fiction fantasy. While we don't have it yet, it's agreed that launching man into space is now simply a matter of time. —And space satellites are due to venture out in mere months! Soooo—you scoff at time travel today. Who knows what tomorrow may bring! And that is what makes science fiction interesting. We don't pooh-pooh any idea. To us all is possible. And, we might add, particularly time travel.*  
 ..... wth

### HAPPY YEARS AHEAD

Dear Bill Hamling:

In the July *TALES* Edmond



Hamilton's **WORLD OF NEVER-MEN** was really great. I consider it Hamilton's best novel so far. It had that "sense of wonder". In fact, I liked it so well I'm subscribing!

I'm sure I'll have a lot of happy years of reading!

Joe Meeks  
1909 Robinson Ave.  
Portsmouth, Ohio

*We're sure too, Joe. Now all you other guys and gals get your subs in too!* . . . . . *with*

### A HIT IN THE S-F UNIVERSE

Dear Bill Hamling:

As usual, every issue of **TALES** is a hit in the universe of s-f reading. So, the July issue was another.

Every story was fully packed with space adventure and intrigue. Particularly I enjoyed **WORLD OF NEVER-MEN**. Couldn't put it down. Really gripping reading.

The features were interesting too, and your editorial was right to the point about the general public warming up man's greatest con-

quest—The Stars. Our dreams, in science fiction are rapidly becoming a reality.

In regard to artist Malcolm Smith's letter rebutting a so-called critic. There are always a number of these people around, and in Malcolm Smith's case I'd just like to see any of the critics do better than he!

W. C. Brandt  
Apt.N

1725 Seminary Ave.  
Oakland 21, Calif.

*We go along with you defending Malcolm. Smitty is a real top-notch artist and he does a yeoman job of being accurate with his covers for both **MADGE** and **TALES**. You'll recall that it was Malcolm Smith who introduced **MADGE**'s now-famed photo-covers some years ago. We're hoping Smitty will be able to come across with some new ones soon. They are very time-consuming projects, and, needless to say, difficult to produce. We'll keep after him . . . Which winds up shop for this issue, gang. Turn the page and subscribe. . . . . with*

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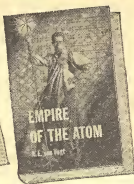
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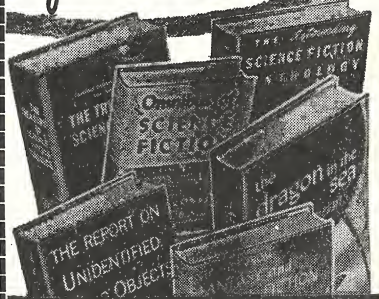
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